

# Shirley Tse

Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice

La Biennale di Venezia

Venice

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John Batten

*"Butterflies stir a breeze  
and the ripples flow unceasingly:  
far away the cyclones swirl.  
It's a whole, connected world.  
Oh, Gaia!" \**

Shirley Tse's tactile, predominantly hand-crafted installations at this year's Venice Biennale were a unique offering. Her Stakeholders presentation in the indoor ground-floor rooms and adjacent outdoor courtyard of the three-storey residential building in the Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale was not whizz-bang technology or smart-idea-as-art; nor was it not big-so-I-must-be-noticed or I'm-backed-by-a-big-gallery. It was refreshingly uncomplicated, using found and natural objects, unconsciously recycled and studiously repurposed. It allowed contemplation and a place for the public to rest and consider: the artist installed a row of simple aluminium bleachers; elevated, rowed seating usually found next to a sports court. Directly in front of these seats was an imagined abstracted game of badminton, *Playcourt*. Inside, glimpsed from the courtyard through open doors was the sprawling installation *Negotiated Differences*.



Installation view of Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice by Shirley Tse. Photo: John Batten.

Thinking was encouraged at the Hong Kong pavilion. The Venice Biennale can be an exhausting contemporary-art experience, albeit one in Venice, the world's most fabulous city-as-art. The intentional provision of an inviting viewing and seating area at the Hong Kong pavilion replicated Venice's own natural, contemplative spaces: the city's churches. Few other country pavilions provided such considered space for their audience to appreciate their presentation.

*Negotiated Differences* is both a departure from and continuation of Tse's interest in depicting abstractions of networks and systems, previously with iconoclastic, formidable solidity. Her Venice installation is

a lighter, open, intricate hybrid structure that links and floats, spans and balances, connects and goads the viewer to follow, immerse and consider the structure's own labyrinthine tracks. Tse explains that her installation is similar to a rhizome, a subterranean plant system that expands through roots and shoots from its nodes.

In a departure from much of her previous work in plastics, the work predominantly uses wood. The exhibition's curator, Christina Li, explains that the artist works "with a rotary lathe, an archaic apparatus considered the point of origin for machine tools. The hand becomes the intermediary between machine and matter. In the turning process, Tse works with, rather than against, the

# 謝淑妮

Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice

威尼斯雙年展

2019年5月11日至11月19日

撰文：約翰·百德

「蝴蝶捲起微風  
漣漪流動不停：  
旋風在遠處轉動。  
整個世界緊扣相連。  
噢，蓋亞！」 \*

本年威尼斯雙年展中，謝淑妮以手工製作為主的觸感裝置可謂獨一無二的作品。威尼斯雙年展香港展館位於一座樓高三層的民居，謝氏的「與事者」展覽分別於地面樓層的室內房間和毗鄰的室外庭院展出。作品並非以平地一聲雷的科技又或以聰明概念作為藝術，也沒有宣稱「我大有來頭所以你必須注意我」或「我有著名畫廊支持」。它清新而不硬要繁複，運用了撿來的和天然的物件，不經意地循環再做、勤勉地賦與新用途。它讓觀眾沉思，也提供了讓公眾稍息與思考的空間：藝術家安裝了簡單的鋁合金看台，那種放在運動場內一排排升高的座位。放在看台前的，是想像、抽象化的羽毛球球賽，名叫《Playcourt》（2019年）。而從庭院透過打開的大門往內窺看，就是在空間中盤桓的裝置作品《Negotiated Differences》（2019年）。

香港展館內展出的作品鼓勵參觀者思考。威尼斯是全世界最精彩的藝術城市，但在這裡舉辦的雙年展也可以是令人疲累的當代藝術體驗。香港展館刻意提供了歡迎參觀與坐下的地方，複製了威尼斯當地教堂，成為了自然地引人思考的空間。其他國家的展館少有提供這



Installation view of Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice by Shirley Tse. Photo: John Batten.

樣為觀眾設想的空間，讓他們慢慢細想展品。

《Negotiated Differences》既遠離也延續謝氏對抽象網絡和體制的興趣，她的前作敬畏而堅定地反對傳統觀念，而威尼斯的裝置則採取了較輕柔、開放、錯綜複雜的混合結構，連結與浮動、延伸與平間，並連繫與激勵觀者跟隨、投入和考慮結構本身千絲萬縷的軌跡。謝氏解釋她的裝置與生於地下的植物根莖系統相似，由節點透過根與芽擴張。

這件作品以木為主，有別於她此前的塑膠創作。展覽策展人李綺敏表示：「車床是一種古老的工具，被視為各種機器工具之源。在旋動的車床上作業時，人的手即變成機器與物質的中介。在車製過程中，謝淑妮要順應木材的紋理，與之合作而非對抗，這可以看作是以觸感呈現協商矛盾。謝氏處理物料時考慮到道德、確認和相互交替。」成果

是透過轉動不同品種和大小木材的轉軸，描繪真實與想像的物件。各物件之間以3D打印的接合裝置連起，整件作品融合了木材、金屬和塑膠。謝氏表示：「車製是減法，物件由削走木材成型，但3D打印則是加法。」

她的根莖在多個房間中蔓生，蘊藏的意念是不同品種的木材，或隱喻人類或任何複雜實體，「重量各有不同，而連接裝置也有不同角度。我想像它們需要與各方協商才可達至平衡。它們都因對抗萬有引力連接起來。」她明確地澄清指：「以人類的說法，這種相輔相成的發起者，也許是看清連接、發現自己在某些事物上有利關係的人。」

2019年普立茲小說獎得主 Richard Powers 的《The Overstory》一書，故事講述九個人物和他們與樹木的關係。該書提出所有樹木和其他生物都是互聯的。Powers的小說參照了蓋亞理論，這理論最



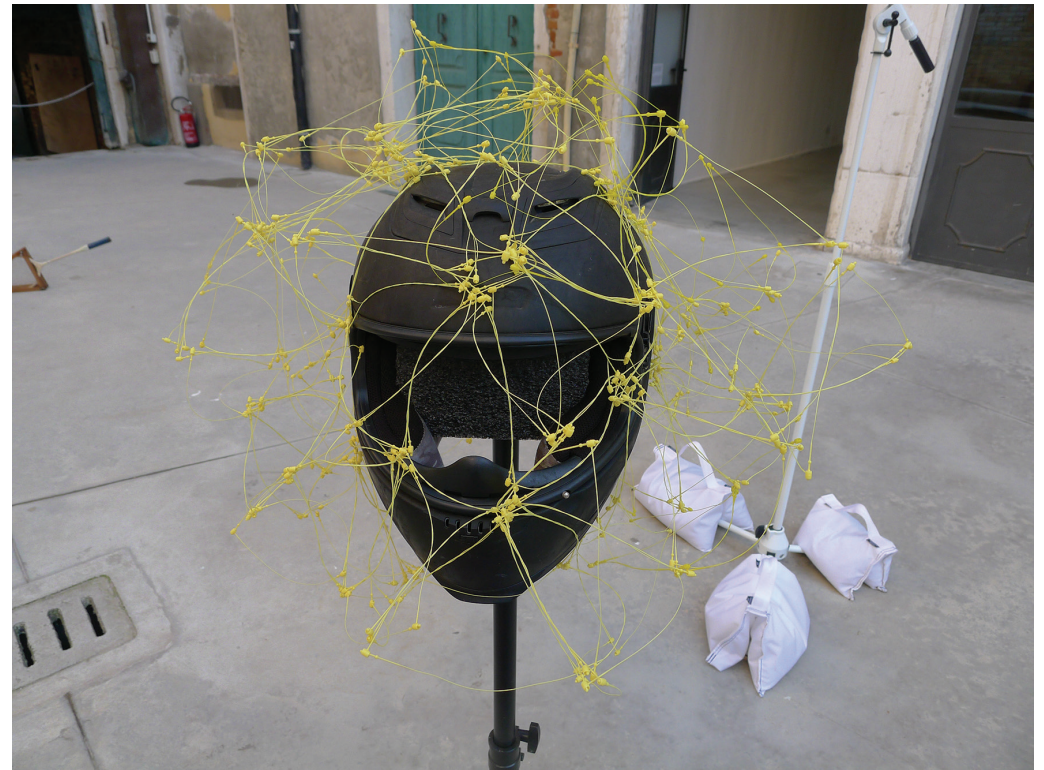


Installation view of *Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice* by Shirley Tse. Photo: John Batten.

grain. Applying force to raw material, in the midst of a volatile sociopolitical reality, is a tactile manifestation of conflict negotiation; Tse's approach to material takes into account ethics, acknowledgement and mutual interchange." The result is turned spindles of different species of wood in different sizes, depicting real and imagined objects – which are linked by 3D-printed connectors, a blend of wood, metal, and plastic. "The lathe work subtracts – objects are formed by carving away from the wood – but the 3D printings adds," says Tse.

Her rhizome spreads through rooms and embodies the idea that the different species of wood – or, metaphorically, humans or any intricate entity – "have different weights, and the connectors have different angles. I imagine them having to negotiate with each other to arrive at a balance. They're joined in their fight against gravity." She explicitly clarifies that, "In human terms this interdependence perhaps starts with individuals who realise they have a stake in something once the connections become clear to them".

Richard Powers' *The Overstory*\*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019, follows nine characters and their relationship with trees. All trees and other living organisms, the book proposes, are interconnected. Powers' fiction refers to the Gaia theory, first proposed by chemist James Lovelock, who died in 2019, and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, fictionalised in Powers' book, that living organisms interact with the world's inorganic surroundings to form a self-regulating biosphere that maintains the world's fragile environment for life to be



Installation view of *Stakeholders, Hong Kong in Venice* by Shirley Tse. Photo: John Batten.

先由2019年離世的化學家 James Lovelock 提出，而Powers 書中的虛構人物微生物學家 Lynn Margulis 則認為生物與世上的非有機環境互動，形成一個自我調節的生物界，維持著地球脆弱的環境，讓生命得以持續。看到謝氏《Negotiated Differences》的一刻，我馬上想到了蓋亞。

正如李綺敏指出，謝氏的裝置回應了「反覆無常的社會政治現實」和生活中的「矛盾協商」，同時避免人工地重新構想謝氏的展覽，以令其符合或不符合香港的示威故事。謝氏的展覽遠在威尼斯，卻正正與香港多場反政府示威同期進行。她的展示難免與充斥世界各地新聞

的示威影像相提並論，參觀者也向展覽導賞員提出關於示威的問題。事實上，示威故事也蘊藏於她兩件裝置作品內。謝氏提出理性協商才可確保體制健康，而香港的示威久久未能回歸「平衡」，只因香港政府在中國中央機關指示下，從未與示威者或城中泛民代表展開任何對話；可惜的是，協商與「相互交替」並不存在，連所有與事者也一樣。但是，在我進入香港展館前，卻在展館破舊路旁的外牆上以模板噴上了「未來？」一詞，像是謝氏展覽和它所反映的香港與中國內地系統性連繫的端倪。

問號是挑戰的意思嗎？是預視從禁閉到解放的突破？又或者只是對囚

禁的存在式控訴？謝氏的《Negotiated Differences》為展館牆上的塗鴉和香港現正面對的政治危機提供了令人驚訝、無法反駁又恰如其份的回應：對話與談判。

《Playcourt》設於展館的庭院，複製出一種香港常見的嗜好：在大街小巷、海灘或公園打羽毛球。遊戲只需要兩位參加者、兩個球拍和一個羽毛球就可以開始，連中間的網也不是必要的，想像的球網已足夠。謝氏的《Playcourt》取材自羽毛球的簡單，她複製出自己的版本：以抽象形態讓觀眾在腦中圈出球員、器具和球局的氣氛。為了加強街頭真實感，謝氏在正中間加設了一條天線，用來捕捉短波廣播訊



sustained. As soon as I saw Tse’s *Negotiated Differences*, I thought: Gaia.

As Christina Li indicates, Tse’s installations echo “a volatile sociopolitical reality” and life’s “conflict negotiation(s)” and, while avoiding artificially reconceptualising Tse’s exhibition to fit or not fit into a Hong Kong protest story, Tse’s exhibition in distant Venice coincided precisely with the city’s anti-government protests. Inevitably, her presentation was viewed alongside the myriad worldwide press protest imagery, and the exhibition’s docents would have fielded enquiries about the protests from visitors. Indeed, the protest story is embedded in her two installations. Tse suggests rational negotiation to ensure a healthy system, whereas the Hong Kong protests have been unable to return to a “balance” because the Hong Kong government, under instruction from the central Chinese authorities, has not opened any kind of dialogue with protesters or the city’s pan-democratic representatives; negotiation and “mutual interchange” are sadly absent, as are all the stakeholders. But, before I even entered the Hong Kong pavilion, an inkling of Tse’s exhibition and its message of systemic links back to Hong Kong and mainland China was stencilled on the pavilion’s tatty street-side exterior wall in the single word: “FUTURE?”

Was the question mark a challenge? Was it anticipating a breakthrough from incarceration to liberation? Or was it simply an existential cry against confinement? Tse’s *Negotiated Differences* offered a surprisingly cogent and appropriate response to the pavilion’s wall graffiti and Hong Kong’s current political crisis: talk and negotiate. Located in the pavilion’s courtyard, *Playcourt* replicates a common Hong Kong pastime: the playing of badminton, often on the street, alley, beach or park. All that is required for a game is two players, two rackets and a shuttlecock – even a net is not necessary; an imaginary one suffices. Tse’s *Playcourt* uses the simplicity of the game to replicate her version: using abstract forms, the viewer can circuit the players, equipment and the atmosphere of a game. Adding street authenticity, Tse has rigged in the middle of it all an antenna to capture shortwave radio signals. The resulting radio static, intermingled with recognisable language, offers a touch of humanity to the scene – the abstract sounds of children playing. Overhead, clothes are drying on a line from a window. The scene is straight from Tse’s Hong Kong childhood, a time when children happily roamed the streets and played.

If *Playcourt* is roughly then, *Negotiated Differences* is roughly now. Tse has been based in California for over two decades

and is also a respected university teacher and writer on the visual arts. She is a member of Hong Kong’s incredibly diverse diaspora, which includes exhibition curator Christina Li. This year’s Hong Kong presentation at Venice has greatly benefited from the diversity inherent in drawing on this community. As Hong Kong’s Nobel Prize recipient Charles Kao said of himself, despite his years away from the city, he is a “Hong Kong believer”. It’s also proof that Tse’s rhizome is very much alive, thriving and vital. We eagerly await her Hong Kong return exhibition at the M+ pavilion in 2020.

\*Peter Hammill, excerpt from *Gaia* on his album *Fireships*, 1991

\*Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, 2018 (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2019)



Photo: John Batten.

號。經天線收集的收音機雜聲，混合著依稀可認的語言，為場景提供了點點人性——是抽象的兒童遊玩聲音。抬頭上望是從窗戶掛起的晾衣繩，正在把衣物風乾。這是來自謝氏香港長大時的場景，那個小孩子開開心心地在街上流連嬉戲的年代。

如果《Playcourt》說的是約莫的過去，《Negotiated Differences》便是約莫的現在。謝氏在加州生活了逾20載，是備受尊敬的大學教師和視覺藝術作家。不少香港人散居海外，謝氏正是其中一員，本展覽的策展人李綺敏也來自這個極多元化的社群。香港在本年威尼斯雙年展展出的作品，很大程

度上受惠於這個社群與生俱來的多元性。雖然高錕離開香港多年，但這位榮獲諾貝爾獎的香港人也形容自己「是屬於香港的」。這也證明了謝氏的根莖仍然精力充沛、茁壯成長。我們熱切期待她於2020年把展覽帶回M+ 展亭。

\*節錄自Peter Hammill於1991年推出的大碟《Fireships》中〈Gaia〉的歌詞

\* 2019年普立茲小說獎得主Richard Powers於2018年發表的《The Overstory》