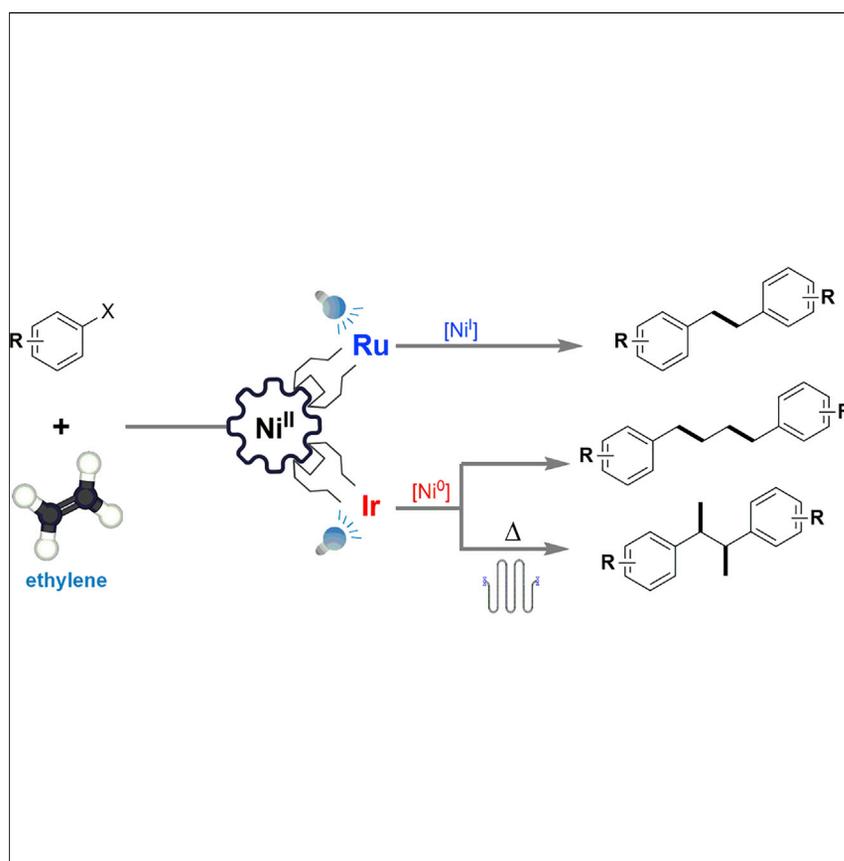


## Article

## Photoredox-Catalysis-Modulated, Nickel-Catalyzed Divergent Difunctionalization of Ethylene



Functionalization of ethylene without polymerization is challenging under photo-irradiation conditions. We have demonstrated that the photo-transformation of ethylene can be controllable by merging photoredox and transition-metal catalysis. In our study, the use of different photoredox catalysts was able to modulate the oxidation state of the nickel catalyst. Through different oxidation states, the nickel-catalyzed couplings proceeded via distinct pathways to generate divergent ethylene difunctionalization products selectively from the same feedstock.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

Photo-mediated selective  
divergent difunctionalization of  
ethylene with aryl halide

Modulation of Ni catalyst  
oxidation states via photoredox  
catalysts

Mechanistic studies supported by  
DFT calculations

Inexpensive and readily available  
feedstocks



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## Article

# Photoredox-Catalysis-Modulated, Nickel-Catalyzed Divergent Difunctionalization of Ethylene

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## SUMMARY

Divergent synthesis represents a powerful strategy for directly accessing different molecular scaffolds originating from the same starting materials. Access to different end products via transition-metal catalysis is conventionally achieved by ligand control. We herein demonstrate the use of ethylene feedstock and commercially available aryl halides to accomplish the divergent synthesis of 1,2-diarylethanes, 1,4-diarylbutanes, or 2,3-diarylbutanes in a highly selective fashion through the synergistic combination of nickel and photoredox catalysis. Mechanistic studies suggest that the observed selectivity was due to different active states of Ni(I) and Ni(0) modulated by Ru- and Ir-based photoredox catalysts, respectively. The ability to access different organometallic oxidation states via photoredox catalysis promises to inspire new perspectives for synergistic transition-metal-catalyzed divergent synthesis.

## INTRODUCTION

Development of catalytic methodology to selectively produce targeted products is of essential focus in organic synthesis. In this regard, divergent synthesis serves as an appealing yet challenging strategy to selectively access multiple scaffolds starting from the same materials.<sup>1,2</sup> Subtle variations on catalysts, additives, solvents, or temperature can account for distinct reaction pathways. In particular, transition-metal catalysts have conventionally relied on the proper choice of ligands bearing different electronic or steric properties to achieve divergent reactivity from the same starting materials (Figure 1A).<sup>3,4</sup>

As the simplest alkene, ethylene is widely utilized in the chemical industry, with an estimated annual global production over 150 million tons, far exceeding that of any other organic compound.<sup>5</sup> The high-volume usage of ethylene in industry includes the production of polyethylene materials and other commodities and feedstocks, such as ethylene oxide, propionic acid, acetaldehyde, and ethylbenzene.<sup>6</sup> However, relatively few methods used ethylene as a reactant for the synthesis of fine chemicals, probably due to its inherent simplicity resulting in molecules of modest complexity and the apprehensions of handling such flammable gas. Existing catalytic transformations of ethylene into fine chemicals are typically limited to monofunctionalization, including Heck or reductive-Heck-type reactions, hydroacylations, hydrovinylation, Wacker oxidations, enyne metathesis, and ethenolysis (Figure 1B).<sup>7</sup> To achieve effective ethylene difunctionalization, there is a need to avoid potential competing side reactions, such as polymerization and oligomerization, in the presence of excess ethylene<sup>8</sup> or  $\beta$ -hydride elimination of *in-situ*-formed alkyl metallic intermediates to give unwanted Heck-type products. In this regard,

## The Bigger Picture

Divergent synthesis that enables a catalytic reaction to selectively produce different products from common substrates will allow the charting of wider chemical space and the unveiling of distinct mechanistic paradigms. A common strategy for it employs different ligands to modulate organometallic catalysts. Dramatic developments in photocatalysis have enabled previously inaccessible transformations. In particular, photoredox catalysis modulates the oxidation state of transition-metal complexes, offering enormous opportunities for methodology development. Herein, we developed a photo-mediated divergent ethylene difunctionalization via modulating oxidation states of the nickel catalyst by using different photoredox catalysts. This work will inspire new perspectives for value-added chemical synthesis using ethylene as a feedstock and shed light on photoredox-catalyst-based divergent synthesis, which fundamentally differs from ligand-controlled transition-metal catalysis.

Sigman and coworkers have pioneered the palladium-catalyzed ethylene difunctionalization providing 1,1-arylvinylation<sup>9</sup> and 1,1-diarylation products.<sup>10,11</sup> In 2015, the Ogoshi group disclosed a 1,2-carbodifunctionalization of ethylene via a selective cross-trimerization of tetrafluoroethylene, ethylene, and aldehydes.<sup>12</sup> Recently, Bower and Russell reported an oxidative ethylene 1,2-difunctionalization via gold-catalyzed oxyarylation.<sup>13</sup> Despite these elegant developments, effective catalytic strategies for difunctionalization of ethylene remain scarce and are highly desirable.

Visible-light photocatalysis has emerged as a powerful technique for organic synthesis over the past decade.<sup>14,15</sup> In particular, the synergistic combination of photoredox catalysis and transition-metal catalysis provides distinct modes for activation of the organometallic complexes through single-electron transfer (SET) or energy transfer.<sup>16</sup> However, to the best of our knowledge, modulating oxidation state of organometallic catalysts by photoredox catalysts to access different catalytic pathways leading to divergent products has not been previously reported. This strategy fundamentally differs from ligand-controlled transition-metal catalysis.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, literature reports on photo-mediated transformations involving gaseous reagents are limited.<sup>18–22</sup> Our group has recently developed a “stop-flow” micro-tubing (SFMT) reactor for efficient screening of gas-involved photo-mediated transformations in a convenient and safe manner.<sup>23</sup> As part of our ongoing interests in developing visible-light-promoted transformations using inexpensive gaseous feedstocks,<sup>23–25</sup> we herein report the light-mediated ethylene difunctionalization through the synergistic combination of photoredox and Ni catalysis. Assisted by photocatalysts with different redox potentials, Ni-catalyzed reductive coupling between aryl halides and ethylene produced 1,2-diarylethanes, 1,4-diarylbutanes, and 2,3-diarylbutanes in a highly selective manner (Figure 1C).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Condition Exploration for Divergent Difunctionalization of Ethylene

Earth-abundant Ni catalysts were selected for the investigation because of their intriguing properties: (1) readily accessible multiple oxidation states, (2) favorable binding with olefins, (3) difficult-to-trigger  $\beta$ -hydride elimination,<sup>26</sup> and (4) privilege in merging with photoredox catalysis.<sup>16,27,28</sup> We commenced our study by evaluating visible-light-promoted difunctionalization of ethylene with 4-iodotoluene **1a** as the model substrate. Through the synergistic merger of a photocatalyst and a Ni catalyst, three different types of products, including one ethylene insertion product **2a**, two ethylene insertion linear product **3a**, and two ethylene insertion branched product **4a**, were generated. After extensive evaluation of reaction parameters (Figure 2 and Tables S1–S16), all three types of products could be achieved in high selectivity from identical starting materials. As shown in Figure 2, 1,2-diarylethane **2a** was obtained in 90% yield with high selectivity (**2a**:**3a** = 13:1) in the presence of Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> (0.5 mol %), NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme (10 mol %), *N,N,N',N'*-tetramethylethylenediamine (TMEDA) (2 equiv), and Hünig's base (2 equiv) in DMSO (0.2 M) under blue light-emitting diode (LED) irradiation at 50°C for 24 hr (entry 1, condition A). On the other hand, **3a** could be prepared in excellent selectivity and yield (90%, **2a**:**3a** = 1:30) using [Ir(ppy)<sub>2</sub>(dtbbpy)]PF<sub>6</sub> (1 mol%) as the photocatalyst in MeCN (0.05 M) at 25°C under blue LED irradiation (entry 6, condition B). Increasing the reaction temperature to 100°C and replacing NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme with NiI<sub>2</sub> in DMSO (0.1 M) delivered **4a** exclusively in high yield (entry 8, condition C). Notably, no diaryl coupling of **1a** or ethylene oligomerization was observed under these visible-light-mediated conditions. The holistic choice of photocatalysts, Ni catalysts, reaction

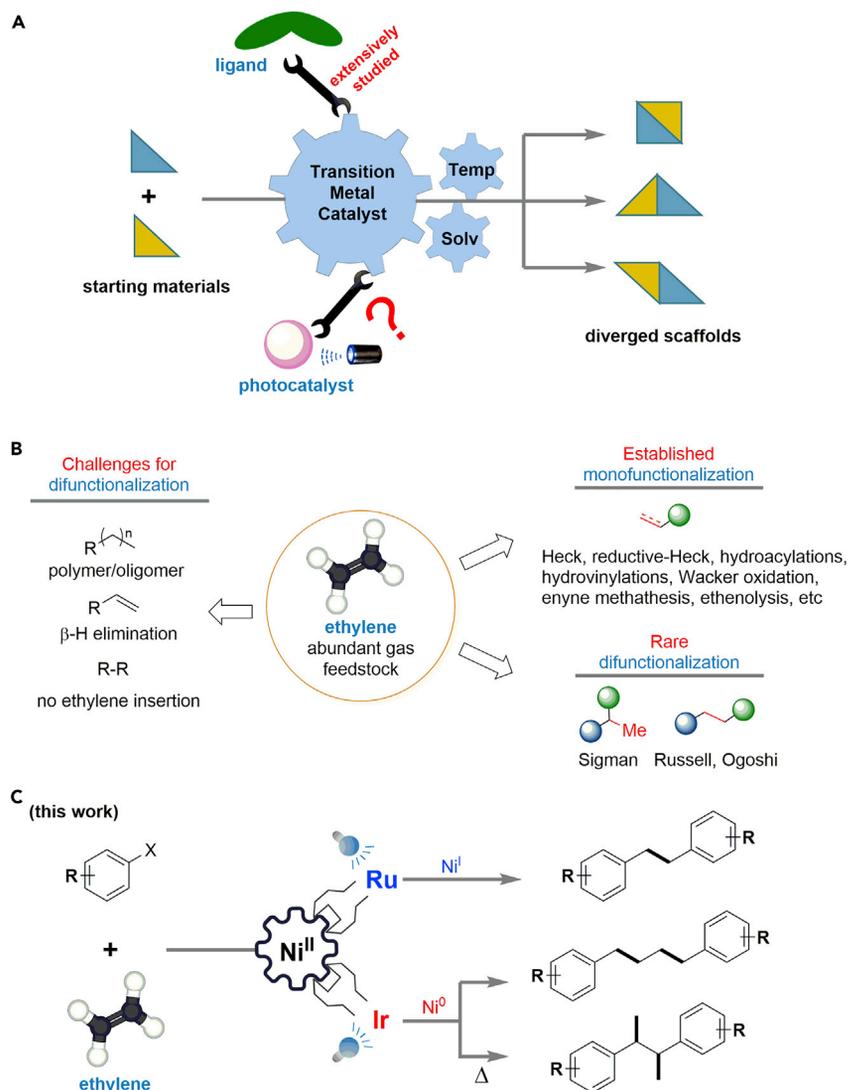
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**Figure 1. Divergent Functionalization of Ethylene**

(A) Strategies for transition-metal-catalyzed divergent synthesis.

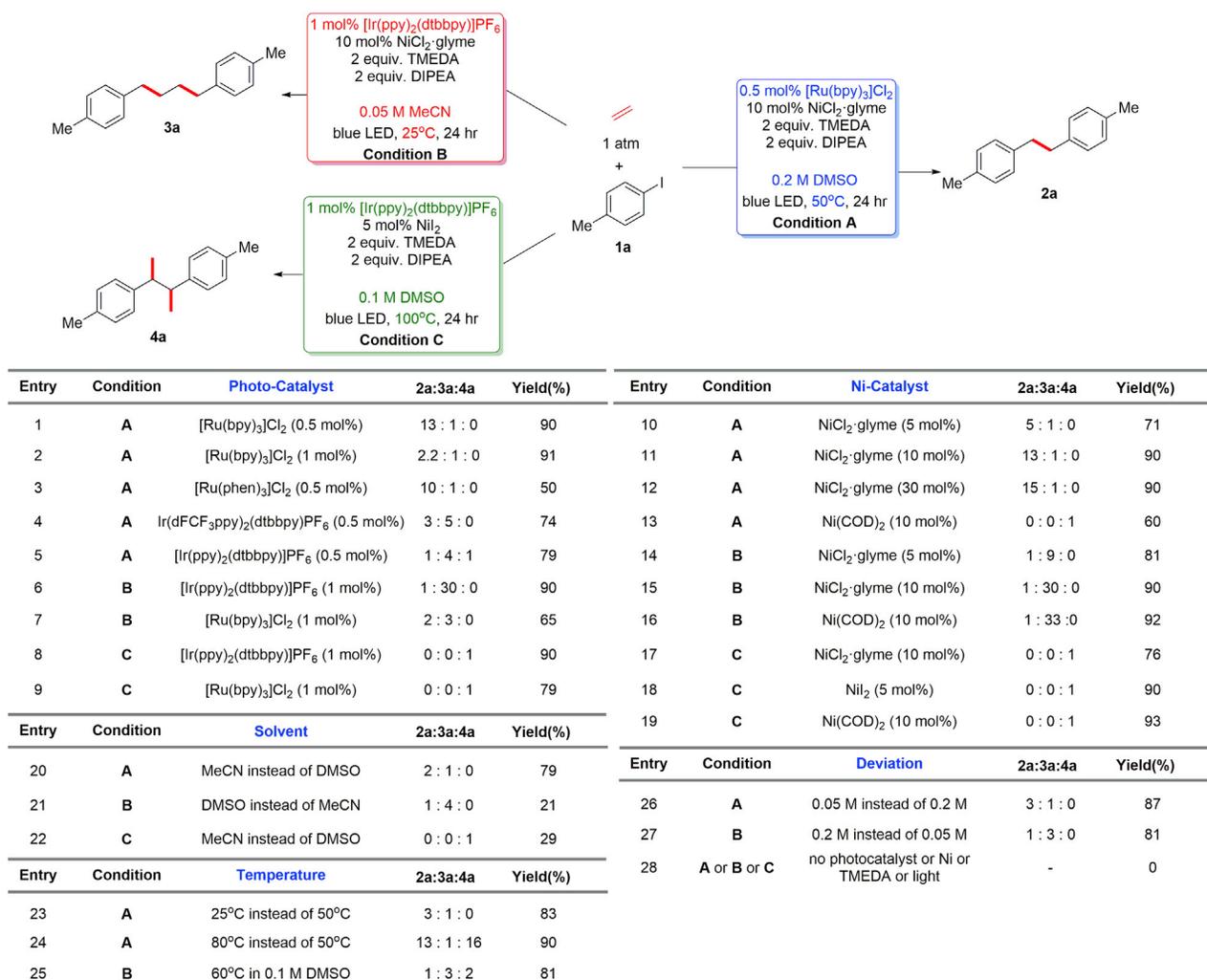
(B) Reported approaches and challenges for ethylene functionalization.

(C) Divergent and selective difunctionalization of ethylene by regulating Ni catalytic behavior with photoredox catalysts.

temperature, concentration, and solvents was critical and exhibited a profound effect on the product selectivity (Tables S1–S16).<sup>29</sup>

### Effect of Photoredox Catalysts

As shown in Figure 2, both  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  and  $\text{Ru}(\text{phen})_3\text{Cl}_2$  with a similar oxidative potential ( $E_{1/2}^{\text{Ru(II)/Ru(I)}} = -1.26$  V versus SCE in DMSO) could selectively produce **2a** in good selectivity and yield under condition A (entries 1 and 3). However, when the photocatalyst was changed to  $\text{Ir}(\text{dFCF}_3\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})\text{PF}_6$  or  $[\text{Ir}(\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})]\text{PF}_6$ , the selectivity decreased with more 1,4-diarylbutane **3a** generated (entries 4 and 5). In addition, increasing the  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  catalyst loading from 0.5 mol% to 1 mol% dramatically eroded the selectivity of **2a** (entry 2). Conversely, the use of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})]\text{PF}_6$  under condition B delivered product **3a** in excellent selectivity, whereas  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  gave low selectivity between **2a** and **3a** (entries 6 and 7).



**Figure 2. Condition Evaluation for Visible-Light-Driven Difunctionalization of Ethylene**

Ratios of **2a:3a:4a** were determined by gas chromatography analysis of crude reaction mixtures. The yields listed are the combined isolated yields, and the diastereomeric ratio (d.r.) of **4a** = 1:1. The reaction for entry 22 was conducted in the stop-flow microtubing reactor at 250 psi pressure. TMEDA, *N,N,N',N'*-tetramethylethylenediamine; DIPEA, *N,N*-diisopropylethylamine.

Notably, both Ir and Ru photocatalysts could explicitly deliver **4a** at 100°C under condition C, albeit in lower yield using the Ru system (entries 8 and 9). Even though the correlation of the photocatalyst and the product selectivity between **2a** and **3a** is still not fully understood at the current stage, and requires further investigation, we did observe that the Ru catalyst favored the formation of product **2a** while the Ir catalyst had a strong tendency toward **3a**.

### Effect of Ni Catalysts

A Ni concentration dependence was observed in both selective formations of **2a** and **3a**. A higher catalyst loading of NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme resulted in an improved selectivity of **2a** under condition A (entries 10–12) and **3a** under condition B (entries 14 and 15), which suggested that both catalytic processes might involve a bi-Ni-species interaction. Reaction using Ni(COD)<sub>2</sub> in place of NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme gave no desired product **2a** under condition A (entry 13), indicating that Ni(0) might not be operative in the active catalytic cycle. In contrast, product **3a** was generated in high yield using Ni(COD)<sub>2</sub> under condition B (entry 16). Using NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme at 100°C under condition C led to

a very high selectivity of **4a**, with 4-chlorotoluene as the sole side product (entry 17). Replacing NiCl<sub>2</sub>.glyme with NiI<sub>2</sub> avoided halogen exchange of **1a** (entry 18). Ni(COD)<sub>2</sub> was also applicable to selectively prepare **4a** (entry 19).

### Effect of Solvent

The formation of **2a** could only be achieved in DMSO or MeCN under condition A (Table S14), and MeCN resulted in much lower selectivity than DMSO (Figure 2, entry 20). Product **3a** could be generated under condition B with other polar solvents such as DMSO, dimethylformamide (DMF), and *N*-methyl-2-pyrrolidone (NMP) (Table S15). However, these solvents were incomparable with MeCN for the selective preparation of **3a**, resulting in lower yield or selectivity. The different selectivity may be attributed to the change of redox potentials of photocatalysts when in different solvents. The formation of **4a** under condition C was more tolerant toward different solvents, as polar solvents such as DMSO, MeCN, DMF, dimethylacetamide, and NMP could all produce **4a** exclusively (Table S16).

### Effect of Temperature and Concentration

Temperature of 50°C and 0.2 M concentration were the optimum criteria for the selective generation of **2a** under condition A. Decreasing the reaction temperature to 25°C or lowering concentration to 0.05 M resulted in lower product selectivity (Figure 2, entries 23 and 26), whereas increasing reaction temperature to 80°C afforded **2a** and a significant amount of 2,3-diarylbutane **4a** (entry 24). The formation of **3a** under condition B proceeded selectively at 25°C and 0.05 M concentration. Increasing reaction temperature and concentration resulted in higher yield of **2a** and **4a** (entries 25 and 27). Further increasing the reaction temperature to 100°C delivered **4a** exclusively in high yield. The selectivity between **2a** and **3a** may be attributed to the varying amount of ethylene in the reaction solution at different temperature and concentration. **4a** was selectively generated above 100°C.

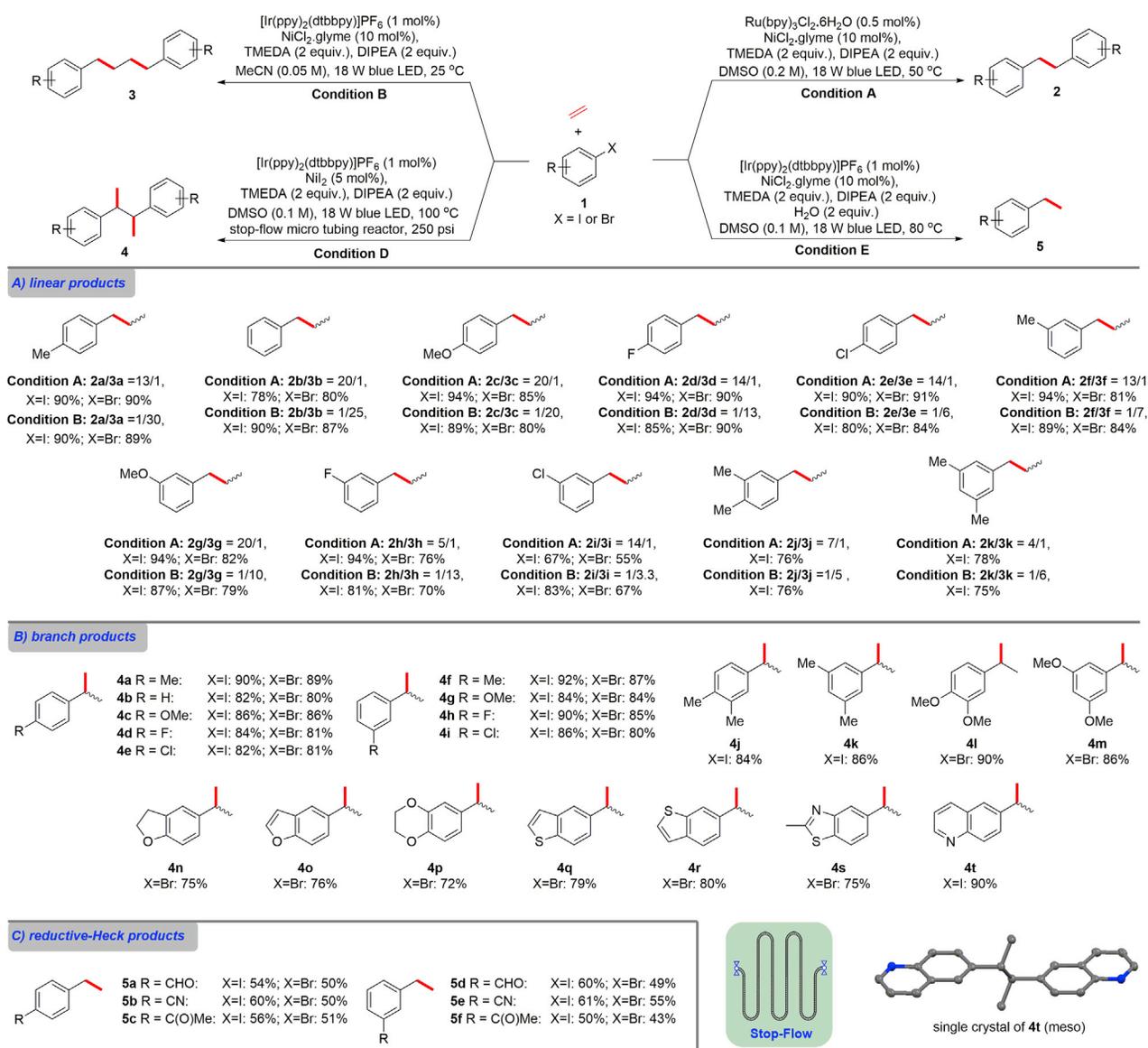
### Effect of Base and Others

Hünig's base could be replaced by Et<sub>3</sub>N, whereas other bases investigated were not effective (Tables S8–S10). Omission or decreased loading of Hünig's base led to lower productivity for compounds **2a**, **3a**, and **4a** (Tables S11–S13). Finally, no product was detected in the absence of either photocatalyst, Ni catalyst, TMEDA, or light, demonstrating the need for all these components (entry 28).<sup>29</sup> Excess TMEDA was required, which served not only as a critical ligand for Ni but also as a "sink" for the halide leaving groups. The formation of TMEDAH-I salts between protonated TMEDA and the halide were detected and characterized by X-ray crystallographic analysis (see Data and Software Availability).

### Reaction Scope Investigation

As outlined in Scheme 1A, *para*- and *meta*-substituted aryl iodides and bromides with either electron-rich or electron-poor functionality could effectively react with ethylene in the presence of Ru/Ni or Ir/Ni dual catalysts under blue LED irradiation to furnish either one ethylene or two ethylene linear insertion products (**2** or **3**) in good yield and selectivity. However, both transformations were drastically affected by steric effects, as *ortho*-substituted aryl halides reacted sluggishly.

The initial substrate expansion of 2,3-diarylbutane product **4** using condition C was only applicable toward *para*-functionalized bromo- and iodoarenes, and other arene and heteroarene variants afforded either no reactivity or dehalogenation



### Scheme 1. Scope of Visible-Light-Driven Divergent Ethylene Difunctionalization

All reactions were conducted under optimized conditions; see the [Supplemental Information](#) for details of conditions A, B, D, and E. Reported yields were isolated yields. Ratios of 2:3 were determined by  $^1\text{H}$  NMR of isolated product mixtures, except where otherwise noted. Ratios of 2a:3a were determined by gas chromatography analysis of crude reaction mixtures. The d.r. for branched product 4 = 1:1 (meso:d) as determined by  $^1\text{H}$  NMR spectrum analysis.

byproducts. Our speculation was that most ethylene escaped out from DMSO solution at 100 °C in batch reactors. The SFMT reactor was thus applied to keep ethylene in the reaction solution at high temperature and high pressure for the substrate scope evaluation of 4 (condition D).<sup>23</sup> The SFMT reactor proved to be efficient for the generation of 2,3-diarylbutanes (4a–4m) from a wide range of *para*- or *meta*-substituted aryl iodides and bromides (Scheme 1B). Further substrate expansion to arene-fused heterocycles was investigated, and 4n–4t were generated effectively. The structure of 4t was confirmed by single-crystal structural analysis, and other products 4 were assigned by analogy. Finally, reductive-Heck products 5a–5f were generated when arenes bearing electron-deficient substituents were subjected

to the Ir/Ni dual catalytic system under blue LED irradiation at 80°C in the presence of water (condition E).

### Mechanistic Elucidation with Supporting Evidence

Reaction discovery studies suggested that the utilization of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})]\text{PF}_6$ , a dilute reaction mixture, and reaction at 25°C would favor the generation of two ethylene insertion product **3**, whereas the use of  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$ , a concentrated reaction mixture, and slight heating at 50°C would prefer the formation of one ethylene insertion product **2**. In addition, the use of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})]\text{PF}_6$  at high temperature (100°C), would selectively generate two ethylene insertion branched product **4**. A critical question raised by these studies relates to tuning reaction conditions resulting in divergent products initiated by the same aryl halide and ethylene.

#### Selective Generation of **2** (Catalytic Cycle A)

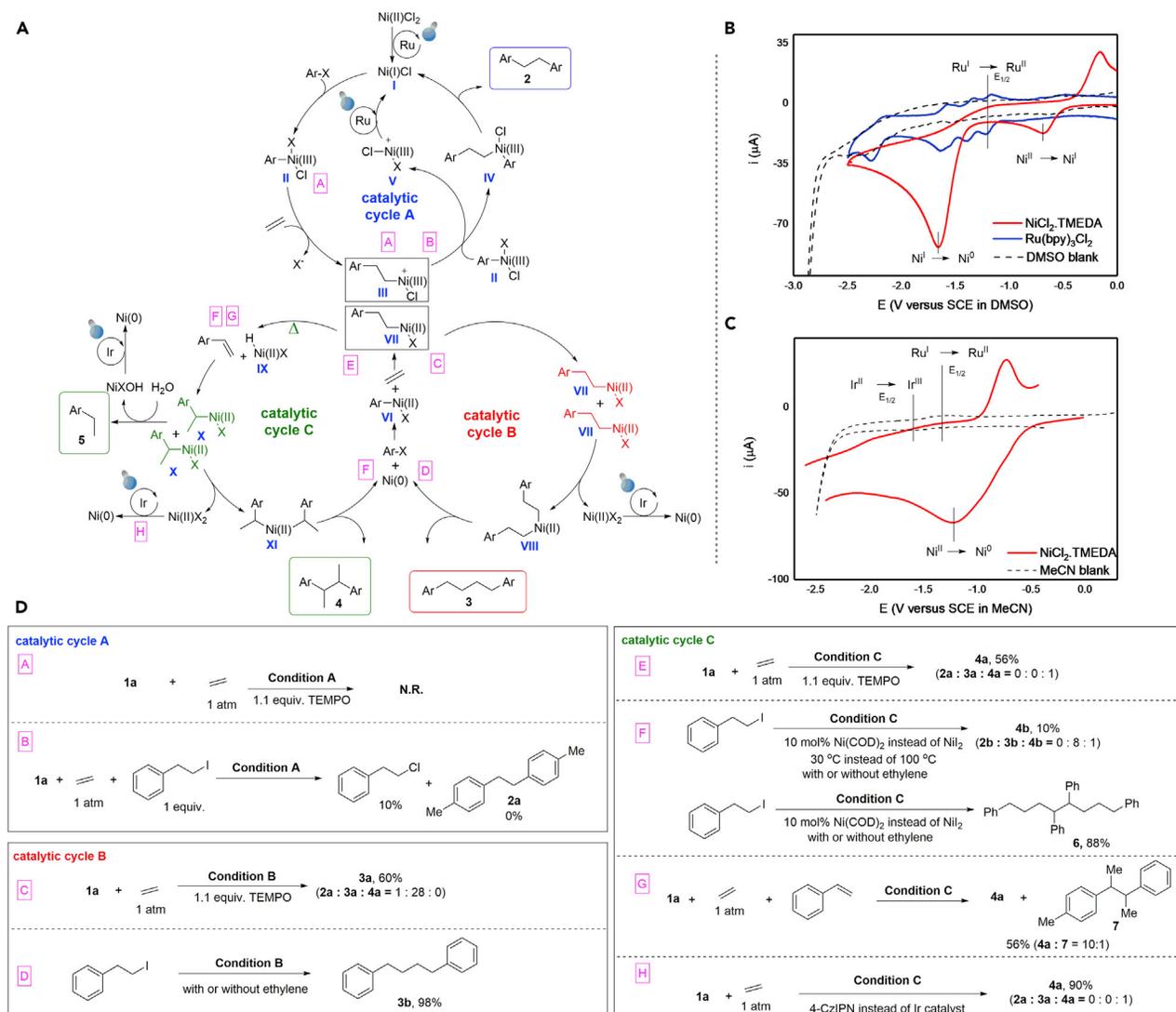
Control experiments and cyclic voltammetry (CV) analysis suggested Ni(I) as the active catalyst for the generation of 1,2-diarylethane **2** in the Ru/Ni dual catalyst system.<sup>30,31</sup> CV analysis of  $\text{NiCl}_2$ -TMEDA complex ( $E_{\text{p}}^{\text{Ni(II)/Ni(I)}} = -0.68$  V and  $E_{\text{p}}^{\text{Ni(I)/Ni(0)}} = -1.66$  V versus SCE in DMSO) and  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  ( $E_{1/2}^{\text{Ru(I)/Ru(II)}} = -1.26$  V versus SCE in DMSO), where Ru(I) can partially reduce Ni(II) to Ni(I) with roughly 0.58 V of thermodynamic driving force, while full reduction of Ni(II) to Ni(0) is unfavorable with roughly  $-0.40$  V (Scheme 2B and Figures S22–S25). These data are in accordance with the reducing ability of  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$ , which is inefficient in conjunction with an amine sacrificial reductant for Ni-catalyzed reductive coupling reactions.<sup>32,33</sup> The reaction was totally suppressed in the presence of stoichiometric TEMPO (Scheme 2D [A]). Furthermore, no ethylene insertion product was observed when equal molarities of **1a** and 2-iodoethylbenzene were added (Scheme 2D [B]). This could indicate a better reactivity of alkyl iodide than of aryl iodide toward the *in situ* generated Ni(I) species and that ethylene insertion into alkyl Ni intermediate may be difficult. Intriguingly, reaction in MeCN resulted in a significant amount of **3a** (**2a**:**3a** = 2:1; Figure 2, entry 20). This was probably due to the similar reduction potential of  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  in MeCN ( $E_{1/2}^{\text{Ru(I)/Ru(II)}} = -1.33$  V versus SCE) versus Ni(II) to Ni(0) ( $E_{\text{p}} = -1.27$  V versus SCE in MeCN) as illustrated in Scheme 2C, where  $\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$  was capable of fully reducing Ni(II) to Ni(0), thereby altering the selectivity.<sup>34</sup> Lastly, light on/off experiments indicated that light was essential for this transformation (Figure S9).

#### Selective Generation of **3** (Catalytic Cycle B)

CV analysis indicated that  $[\text{Ir}(\text{ppy})_2(\text{dtbbpy})]\text{PF}_6$  ( $E_{1/2}^{\text{Ir(II)/Ir(III)}} = -1.51$  V versus SCE in MeCN) gave roughly 0.24 V of thermodynamic driving force to fully reduce Ni(II) complex to Ni(0) ( $E_{\text{p}} = -1.27$  V versus SCE in MeCN; Scheme 2C), which indicated that Ni(0) was involved in the formation of **3a**. The reaction proceeded to afford **3a** in the presence of 1.1 equiv TEMPO (Scheme 2D [C]), suggesting a non-radical pathway. Starting with 2-iodoethylbenzene instead of 4-iodotoluene **1a** exclusively generated homo-dimerization product **3b** (Scheme 2D [D]). The absence of ethylene insertion again suggested that the transient alkyl Ni intermediate might not undergo migratory insertion with ethylene, thus preventing ethylene oligomerization and polymerization.

#### Selective Generation of **4** (Catalytic Cycle C)

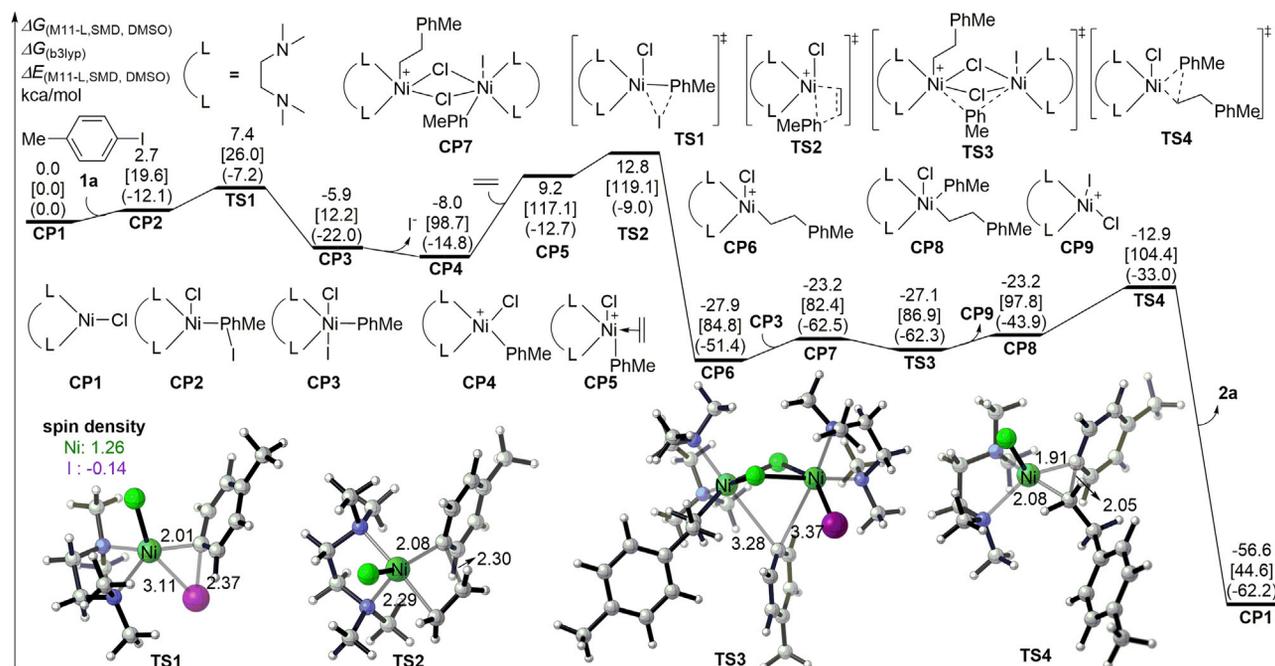
Prevailing mechanistic studies indicates that Ni(0) will be generated with Ir-photocatalyst. Radical may not be involved in the catalytic cycle as desired product **4a** was generated in the presence of 1.1 equiv TEMPO (Scheme 2D [E]). **4b** could be obtained when 2-iodoethylbenzene instead of 4-iodotoluene **1a** was used in the



## Scheme 2. Proposed Mechanisms with Supporting Evidence

- (A) Proposed plausible mechanisms. Photo-reductive quenching cycle was omitted for clarity; see Figures S18–S20 for detail mechanisms of each cycle.  
 (B) Cyclic voltammery analysis of Ni catalyst and Ru photocatalyst in DMSO.  
 (C) Cyclic voltammery analysis of Ni catalyst, Ru and Ir photocatalysts in MeCN.  
 (D) Control experiments to elucidate the mechanisms.

presence of  $\text{Ni}(\text{COD})_2$  catalyst at  $30^\circ\text{C}$  (Scheme 2D [F] and Figure S11), which supported that the isomerization of alkyl Ni intermediate through  $\beta$ -hydride elimination to generate nickel hydride was possible even at room temperature to deliver branched product 4. Surprisingly, increasing temperature to  $100^\circ\text{C}$  exclusively delivered tetramer 6, which indicated that the *in situ* generated nickel hydride would preferentially undergo reductive elimination in the presence of amine base instead of re-inserting back onto styrene (see Figure S13 for proposed mechanism). Further investigations are underway to explore this unprecedented transformation. In addition, the nickel hydride species was capable of intercepting another olefin present in the reaction mixture (Scheme 2D [G] and Figure S12).<sup>35</sup> Finally, organo-photocatalyst 1,2,3,5-tetrakis(carbazol-9-yl)-4,6-dicyanobenzene (4CzIPN)<sup>36</sup> could be applied to replace the Ir catalyst to enable a more economical transformation



**Figure 3. Free-Energy Profiles for the Ni(I)-Ni(III) Catalytic Cycle of the Diarylethane Product 2a Generation Process**

Values for bond lengths are given in angstroms.

(Scheme 2D [H]). Deuteration experiments suggested that the mechanism for the generation of product 5 was built on catalytic cycle C, where alkyl Ni was quenched by D<sub>2</sub>O instead of DMSO after isomerization (Figure S14).

To further reveal the Ni(I)-based mechanistic pathway for the selective generation of diarylethane product 2, density functional theory (DFT) method M11-L was applied. As shown in Figure 3, the active catalyst Ni(I) species CP1 was chosen as the relative zero point for the free energy profiles, which could be generated via SET with reduced photocatalyst Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> (a detailed mechanism is shown in Figure S18). The generation of an aryl radical via Ni(I)-induced SET oxidative addition was ruled out as the relative free energy was too high (50.2 kcal/mol; Figure S16). 4-Iodotoluene 1a was thus activated by coordinating with CP1 to give the intermediate CP2 with a free energy increase of 2.7 kcal/mol. The subsequent oxidative addition occurred via a three-membered ring transition state TS1 with a 7.4 kcal/mol overall barrier, where an aryl-Ni(III) complex CP3 was generated. The geometry of TS1 is shown in Figure 3, in which the Ni-I distance (3.11 Å) was shorter than the sum of their van der Waals radii. The calculated spin density of this transition state illustrated that the unpaired electrons were mainly localized on the Ni atom. Further intrinsic reaction coordinate calculations demonstrated that iodide coordinated with Ni(III) to form intermediate CP3 following TS1. Then the ligand exchange with ethylene would form intermediate CP5 with 15.1 kcal/mol endergonic with the release of iodide. The irreversible migratory insertion of coordinated ethylene into aryl-Ni bond occurred via transition state TS2 with an overall barrier of 20.8 kcal/mol to form an alkyl Ni(III) intermediate CP6. The theoretical calculation revealed that the ethylene insertion step was considered to be the rate-determining step in catalytic cycle A. Further coordination of CP6 followed by insertion of another ethylene was unfavorable with a 26.6 kcal/mol endergonic barrier (Figure S17). CP6 could react with intermediate CP3 to form a dichloro-bridged binuclear Ni(III) intermediate

CP7. Then rapid intramolecular transmetalation of the aryl group could take place via TS3. The calculated barrier of this step was lower than zero, which could be attributed to the computational error of the solvation effect and the usage of entropy correction in the gas phase. The following reductive elimination could take place from a mononuclear Ni(III) intermediate CP8 with a free energy barrier of only 10.3 kcal/mol through TS4. After releasing product 2a, the active catalyst CP1 was regenerated. Moreover, the possibility for the formation of 1,4-diarylbutane 3a through the Ni(I)–Ni(III) catalytic cycle was considered theoretically (Figure S15). However, the overall activation free energy for the formation of 3a was 34.8 kcal/mol via transition state TS6, and the relative free energy was 19.8 kcal/mol higher than via TS4.

### Tentative Proposed Mechanistic Cycle

In light of all the experimental data and DFT calculation, plausible mechanistic pathways for the divergent ethylene functionalization are proposed in Scheme 2A. Different from previously reported Ni(0)-catalyzed reductive coupling reactions,<sup>31,37</sup> the synthesis of 1,2-diarylethane 2 (catalytic cycle A) is initiated by Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>-promoted Ni(I) formation. The generated Ni(I) intermediate I subsequently undergoes oxidative addition with aryl halides to form aryl-Ni(III) species II. Migratory insertion of ethylene into aryl-Ni(III) with the dissociation of a halide ligand (trapped by TMEDA<sup>+</sup>) generates a cationic alkyl Ni(III) species III. The aryl transfer by a transmetalation between III and aryl-Ni(III) species II delivers an aryl alkyl Ni(III) species IV, which can undergo a rapid reductive elimination to yield diarylethane product 2 and regenerate the active Ni(I) catalyst I. The transmetalation process would also generate a cationic Ni(III) species V, which could be reduced by a Ru-based photoredox cycle to regenerate Ni(I) I. As for Ir-catalyzed generation of 1,4-diarylbutanes 3 (catalytic cycle B), Ni(II) precursor is fully reduced to Ni(0) through the Ir-based photoredox cycle. Oxidative insertion of aryl halides to Ni(0) followed by ethylene migratory insertion furnishes alkyl Ni(II) complex VII. As suggested by control experiments, additional ethylene insertion would not occur with alkyl Ni species VII, thereby preventing unwanted oligomerization and polymerization. Transmetalation between two molecules of complex VII delivers the dialkyl Ni(II) intermediate VIII and a Ni(II) halide, the latter will be reduced by photocatalyst and amine reductant to regenerate Ni(0). Reductive elimination of VIII achieves 3 and Ni(0). In the proposed catalytic cycle C for the selective generation of 2,3-diarylbutanes 4, Ni(II) complex VII is generated via Ir-photocatalyst through a similar process as catalytic cycle B.  $\beta$ -Hydride elimination is triggered at high temperature to give a Ni hydride species IX, which then undergoes a reinsertion to form the more thermodynamically favored benzyl Ni intermediate X.<sup>38</sup> Transmetalation between two molecules of X followed by reductive elimination accomplishes the synthesis of 4 and regenerates the Ni(0) catalyst. Alternatively, in the presence of water, intermediate X could be quenched to deliver reductive Heck-type product 5.

### Conclusion

In summary, we have discovered a divergent synthesis of 1,2-diarylethanes, 1,4-diarylbutanes, 2,3-diarylbutanes, and ethylarenes from a common aryl halide and ethylene through the synergistic combination of photoredox and Ni catalysis. All products can be generated in a highly selective fashion by proper selection of photocatalysts and tuning the reaction parameters. Various control experiments and DFT calculations were conducted to explore the mechanisms for the selective product generation. Our study showcases the difunctionalization of ethylene under photoredox conditions, which will inspire new perspectives for value-added chemical synthesis using ethylene as a feedstock. Furthermore, distinct catalytic pathways

can be obtained via photoredox modulation of organometallic intermediates to access desired oxidation states, which will shed new light on transition-metal-catalyzed divergent synthesis.

## EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Full experimental procedures are provided in the [Supplemental Information](#).

## DATA AND SOFTWARE AVAILABILITY

The structures of TMEDAH-I, *meso*-**4t**, and **6** reported in this article have been deposited in the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre under accession numbers CCDC: 1825640, 1825641, and 1825642, respectively.

## SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Supplemental Information includes Supplemental Experimental Procedures, 123 figures, 38 tables, and 3 data files and can be found with this article online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chempr.2018.10.006>.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

J.L. and H.W.C. conducted the experiments and analyzed the data. Y. Luo and Y. Lan conducted the DFT calculation and mechanism study. J.W. and J. Li designed the project, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

## DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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