Polypeptide vesicles with densely packed multilayer membranes
Ziyuan Song,†a Hojun Kim,†a Xiaochu Ba,b Ryan Baumgartner,†b Jung Seok Lee,a Haoyu Tang,a Cecilia Leal* and Jianjun Cheng*ab

Multilamellar membranes are important building blocks for constructing self-assembled structures with improved barrier properties, such as multilamellar lipid vesicles. Polymeric vesicles (polymersomes) have attracted growing interest, but multilamellar polymersomes are much less explored. Here, we report the formation of polypeptide vesicles with unprecedented densely packed multilayer membrane structures with poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly(γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-L-glutamate) (PEG-b-PL), an amphiphilic diblock rod-coil copolymer containing a short PEG block and a short hydrophobic rod-like polypeptide segment. The polypeptide rods undergo smectic ordering with PEG buried between the hydrophobic polypeptide layers. The size of both blocks and the rigidity of the hydrophobic polypeptide block are critical in determining the membrane structures. Increase of the PEG length in PEG-b-PL results in the formation of bilayer sheets, while using random-coil polypeptide block leads to the formation of large compound micelles. UV treatment causes ester bond cleavage of the polypeptide side chain, which induces helix-to-coil transition, change of copolymer amphiphilicity, and eventual disassembly of vesicles. These polypeptide vesicles with unique membrane structures provide a new insight into self-assembly structure control by precisely tuning the composition and conformation of polymeric amphiphiles.

Introduction
Polymeric vesicles (or polymersomes) have found broad applications in encapsulation and drug delivery.1–7 Amphiphilic block copolymers with coil-coil structures are often used to form sandwich-like 2D curved membrane structures with a hydrophobic wall and hydrophilic inner and outer coronas.1,2 A hydrophobic polymer segment with high molecular weight (MW) is essential to ensure strong interactions between chains (e.g., chain entanglement and/or hydrophobic interaction) to form a kinetically frozen hydrophobic layer with appropriate toughness.8 In addition, the strong interactions are necessary to impart low membrane permeability for the stable encapsulation of cargo.1,9 Although polymersomes are structurally related to liposomes, as both are vesicles with hollow interiors, one key structural difference is that liposomes have well packed short lipid bilayer structures whereas polymersomes are based on randomly entangled long hydrophobic polymers. Control over the stability and membrane permeability of polymersomes rather than the detailed molecular arrangement in the hydrophobic layer has been largely the focus of study in the past 20 years.1,2,9–11

In contrast to coil–coil block copolymers, rod-coil block copolymers have received increasing attention in solution self-assembly due to the special rigid conformation of the rod blocks.13–14 The anisotropic alignment of hydrophobic rods favors the formation of 2D membranes with lower curvature rather than the formation of spherical micelles.2,14 Polypeptides, a class of polymeric biomaterials with broad biological and biomedical applications,15–21 can adopt rigid α-helical conformation and have been demonstrated to be excellent rod-like building blocks for vesicle membranes.22–24 For instance, Deming et al. first reported polypeptide vesicles through the conformation-specific self-assembly of amphiphilic diblock copolypeptides.25,26 Membrane stability was enhanced by the preferred side-by-side alignment of rigid rod-like hydrophobic polypeptide helices along the helical axis and the lower conformational entropy loss during the assembly process.2,5 The detailed polypeptide vesicle membrane structures, however, have never been fully studied, although they are believed to form very thin hydrophobic layers (several nanometers) with the suggested unilamellar membrane

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a Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 1304 West Green Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801, USA. E-mail: jianjunc@illinois.edu
b Department of Chemistry, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 505 South Mathews Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801, USA. E-mail: cecilia@illinois.edu
c Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Monomer and polymer characterization details (‘H NMR, CD, and ATR–FTIR spectra of synthesized materials), additional TEM images, and disassembly studies with Nile Red probe. See DOI: 10.1039/c5sm00820d
‡ Contributed equally.
Experimental section

Materials

All chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA) and used as received unless otherwise specified. Anhydrous N,N-dimethylformamide (DMF) was dried by a column packed with 4 Å molecular sieves and stored in a glovebox. Anhydrous tetrahydrofuran (THF) and hexane were dried by a column packed with alumina. Methoxy poly(ethylene glycol) amines (mPEG-NH₂, 1 kDa, 2 kDa and 5 kDa) were purchased from Laysan Bio (Arab, AL, USA). Spectra/Por RC dialysis tubings with molecular weight cut off (MWCO) of 1 kDa were purchased from Spectrum Laboratories (Rancho Dominguez, CA, USA). Carbon film and holey carbon film supported copper grids (200 mesh) were purchased from Electron Microscopy Sciences (Hatfield, PA, USA).

Instrumentation

¹H nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectra were recorded on a Varian U500 MHz or a VXR-500 MHz spectrometer. Chemical shifts were reported in ppm and referenced to the solvent proton impurities. Gel permeation chromatography (GPC) experiments were performed on a system equipped with an isocratic pump (Model 1100, Agilent Technology, Santa Clara, CA, USA), a DAWN HELEOS multi-angle laser light scattering (MALLS) detector (Wyatt Technology, Santa Barbara, CA, USA), and an Optilab rEX refractive index detector (Wyatt Technology, Santa Barbara, CA, USA). The detection wavelength of HELEOS was set at 658 nm. Separations were performed using serially connected size exclusion columns (10² Å, 10³ Å, 10⁴ Å, 10⁵ Å, and 10⁶ Å Phenogel columns, 5 µm, 300 × 7.8 mm, Phenomenex, Torrance, CA, USA) at 60 °C using DMF containing 0.1 mol L⁻¹ LiBr as the mobile phase. The MALLS detector was calibrated using pure toluene and can be used for the determination of the absolute molecular weights. The MWs of polymers were determined based on the dn/dc value of each polymer sample calculated offline by using the internal calibration system processed by the ASTRA 6 software (version 6.1.1.17, Wyatt Technology, Santa Barbara, CA, USA). Circular dichroism (CD) measurements were carried out on a JASCO J-815 CD spectrometer (JASCO, Easton, MD, USA). The polymer samples were prepared at a concentration of 0.40 mg mL⁻¹ in aqueous solution at pH = 7 and the solution was placed in a quartz cell with a pathlength of 0.10 cm. The mean residue molar ellipticity of each polypeptide was calculated on the basis of the measured apparent ellipticity by following the literature-reported formulas: ellipticity [(θ) in deg cm² dmol⁻¹] = (millidegrees × mean residue weight)/(path length in millimetres × concentration of polypeptide in mg mL⁻¹)]. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and cryogenic TEM (cryo-TEM) images were collected using JEOL 2100 cryo transmission electron microscope. Ultraviolet (UV) light was generated from an OmniCure S1000 UV lamp (Lumen Dynamics Group, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada). Infrared spectra were recorded on a Perkin Elmer 100 serial FTIR spectrophotometer calibrated with polystyrene film (PerkinElmer, Santa Clara, CA, USA). Fluorescent spectra were recorded on a...
Perkin Elmer LS 55 fluorescence spectrometer (PerkinElmer, Santa Clara, CA, USA).

Synthesis of γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-l-glutamate (DMNB-L-Glu) and γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-o-glutamate (DMNB-o-Glu)

DMNB-L-Glu was synthesized following the reported procedure. In a 250 mL flat bottom flask, N,N,N',N'-tetramethylethlenediamine (1.1 mL, 8.77 mmol) was added dropwise to a stirred mixture of l-glutamic acid (0.65 g, 4.45 mmol) and l-glutamic acid copper(n) complex (1.05 g, 2.14 mmol) in DMF (4.0 mL) and distilled DI water (0.6 mL). The solution was stirred at room temperature for 2 h until all solids were dissolved and then more DMF (3.0 mL) was added. 4,5-Dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl bromide (2.5 g, 9.06 mmol) was added to the above solution in one portion. The reaction mixture was stirred at 40 °C for 24 h. Acetone (100 mL) was added to the mixture and stirred for 2 h until a fine precipitate was obtained. The violet solid was collected by filtration, followed by washing with freshly prepared ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (1.89 g/sodium bicarbonate (1.08 g) aqueous solution (15 mL) to remove excessive copper salts. The mixture was stirred for another 24 h. The crude product was collected by filtration and washed with DI water. The solid was further purified by recrystallization from isopropanol/DI water (1:1, v/v). Isopropanol was then removed under vacuum and DI water was removed via lyophilization to yield the final product DMNB-L-Glu as light yellow powder (1.74 g, 77% yield).

The glassware was wrapped with aluminum foil to avoid light exposure during the whole process. H NMR (DMSO-d6/D2O–DCl (35 wt%), 9:1, v/v): δ 7.59 (s, 1H, ArH), 7.11 (s, 1H, ArH), 5.30 (s, 2H, ArCH2–), 3.86 (t, 1H, δ-xH), 3.83 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.78 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 2.60 (m, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–), 2.04 (m, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–).

DMNB-o-Glu was synthesized similarly using o-glutamic acid and o-glutamic acid copper(n) complex. The final product was obtained as light yellow powder (78% yield). H NMR (DMSO-d6/D2O–DCl (35 wt%), 9:1, v/v): δ 7.58 (s, 1H, ArH), 7.10 (s, 1H, ArH), 5.29 (s, 2H, ArCH2–), 3.85 (t, 1H, δ-xH), 3.82 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.77 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 2.58 (m, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–), 2.03 (m, 2H, –COCH2CH2–).

Synthesis of γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-l-glutamate N-carboxy anhydride (DMNB-L-Glu-NCA) and γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-o-glutamate N-carboxy anhydride (DMNB-o-Glu-NCA)

In a dried 250 mL two-neck round bottom flask, DMNB-L-Glu (0.70 g, 2.04 mmol) was added and dried under vacuum for 2 h. Phosgene (15 wt% in toluene, 2.0 mL, 2.80 mmol) was added along with anhydrous THF (30 mL), the mixture was stirred at 50 °C for 2 h under the protection of drying tube. Solvent THF was then removed under vacuum to obtain a yellow solid. The crude product was purified by recrystallization from THF/hexane (1:5, v/v) three times in a glovebox to obtain light yellow crystal (0.63 g, 84% yield). The resulting DMNB-L-Glu-NCA monomer was stored at −30 °C in the glovebox. The glassware was wrapped with aluminum foil to avoid light exposure during the whole process. H NMR (CDCl3): δ 7.70 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.97 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.50 (s, 1H, NH), 5.48 (q, 2H, ArCH2–), 4.46 (t, 1H, δ-xH), 4.00 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.96 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 2.65 (t, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–), 2.24 (m, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–). C NMR (CDCl3): δ 172.2, 169.6, 153.7, 151.9, 148.9, 140.5, 125.9, 111.6, 108.6, 64.4, 57.0, 56.8, 56.7, 29.8, 27.1.

DMNB-o-Glu-NCA was synthesized similarly using DMNB-o-Glu. The final product was obtained as light yellow crystal (80% yield). H NMR (CDCl3): δ 7.71 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.97 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.20 (s, 1H, NH), 5.50 (q, 2H, ArCH2–), 4.44 (t, 1H, δ-xH), 4.01 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.97 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 2.65 (t, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–), 2.26 (m, 2H, –CH2CH2CO–).

Synthesis of poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly(γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-l-glutamate) (PEG-b-PL) poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly(γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-o-glutamate) (PEG-b-PD) and poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly(γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-o-glutamate) (PEG-b-PDL)

In a glovebox, DMNB-L-Glu-NCA (60 mg, 0.16 mmol) was dissolved in DMF (1.50 mL), followed by adding the DMF solution of mPEG-NH2 (0.02 mol L–1, 407 μL, 0.008 mmol, M/I = 20). The polymerization mixture was stirred at room temperature. FTIR was used to monitor the polymerization until the conversion was above 99%. The polymer was then precipitated by cold hexane/ethanol (1:1, v/v) and collected by centrifugation. The final polymer PEG-b-PL was obtained as viscous yellow solid after removing the solvent residue under vacuum (80–87% yield). The glassware was wrapped with aluminum foil to avoid light exposure during the whole process. H NMR (CDCl3/TFA-d6, 85:15, v/v): δ 7.66 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.97 (s, 1H, ArH), 5.40 (s, 2H, ArCH2–), 4.67 (s, 1H, δ-xH), 3.94 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.92 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.78 (s, 4H, –OCH2CH2–), 2.59 (s, 2H, –COCH2CH2–), 2.14 (d, 2H, –COCH2CH2–).

PEG-b-PD was synthesized similarly using DMNB-o-Glu-NCA as the monomer. The final product was obtained as a viscous yellow solid (82–85% yield). H NMR (CDCl3/TFA-d6, 85:15, v/v): δ 7.65 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.96 (s, 1H, ArH), 5.39 (s, 2H, ArCH2–), 4.64 (s, 1H, δ-xH), 3.93 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.92 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.77 (s, 4H, –OCH2CH2–), 2.59 (s, 2H, –COCH2CH2–), 2.13 (d, 2H, –COCH2CH2–).

PEG-b-PDL was synthesized similarly by mixing DMNB-L-Glu-NCA and DMNB-o-Glu-NCA with a 1:1 ratio as the monomers. The final product was obtained as yellow solid (78–82% yield). H NMR (CDCl3/TFA-d6, 85:15, v/v): δ 7.63 (s, 1H, ArH), 6.97 (s, 1H, ArH), 5.38 (s, 2H, ArCH2–), 4.64 (s, 1H, δ-xH), 3.93 (s, 3H, CH3–O–), 3.93 (s, 6H, CH3–O–), 3.76 (s, 4H, –OCH2CH2–), 2.58 (s, 2H, –COCH2CH2–), 2.14 (d, 2H, –COCH2CH2–).

Preparation of copolymer self-assemblies in aqueous solution

Dried PEG-b-PL diblock copolymer powder (5 mg, or with 0.1 wt% Nile Red) was dissolved in DMF (1.0 mL) in a small vial charged with a magnetic stir bar, followed by dropwise addition of DI water (4.0 mL) via syringe pump (KD Scientific, Holliston, MA, USA. Addition speed: 0.1 mL min–1). The suspension was stirred at room temperature for 2 h, and then transferred to a dialysis bag (MWCO = 1 kDa). The assemblies were dialyzed against DI water for 4 h to remove DMF (water changed...
every hour). The resulting suspension was used for subsequent studies.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

TEM samples were prepared on carbon film supported copper grids (200 mesh). One drop (~10 μL) of diluted copolymer assembly aqueous suspension (0.25–0.5 mg mL⁻¹) was placed on the grid and allowed to interact with the surface for 10 min. Filter paper was then used to remove the residual polymers and liquid. The sample on the grid was imaged using JEOL 2100 cryo TEM at 80 kV.

Cryogenic transmission electron microscopy (Cryo-TEM)

Cryo-TEM samples were prepared on holey carbon film supported copper grids (200 mesh) using Vitrobot (FEI, Hillsboro, OR, USA). One drop (~10 μL) of diluted copolymer assembly aqueous suspension (0.25–0.5 mg mL⁻¹) was placed on the grid, and the drop was blotted with blotting paper. The solution residue was then vitrified by rapidly immersing it into liquid ethane. The vitrified sample was transferred to a JEOL 2100 cryo TEM microscope for imaging using a cryo-holder at 200 kV. The temperature of the sample was kept below ~180 °C during the course of sample preparation and imaging.

Small/wide-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS/WAXS)

Copolymer assembly samples were prepared in 1.5 mm quartz cuvettes (Hilgenberg Glas, Germany) and the SAXS/WAXS experiments were conducted in a home built (Forvis Technologies, Santa Barbara, CA, USA) equipment composed of a Xenocs GeniX3D CuKα Ultra Low Divergence X-ray source (1.54 Å/8 keV), with a divergence of ~1.3 mrad. The 2D diffraction data were radially averaged upon acquisition on a Pilatus 300 K 20 Hz hybrid pixel Detector (Dectris) and integrated using FIT2D software (http://www.esrf.eu/computing/scientific/FIT2D) from ESRF.35,36

UV irradiation studies

The copolymer aqueous suspension (1.0 mL) was transferred to a small vial charged with a magnetic stir bar, the vial was then placed under UV lamp for UV irradiation (λ = 365 nm, I = 0–50 mW cm⁻², t = 0–30 min). The UV intensity and irradiation time was controlled through the UV lamp to study the disassembly process.

Results and discussion

We prepared PEG-polypeptide amphiphilic diblock copolymers through ring-opening polymerization (ROP) of γ-(4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl)-L-glutamate N-carboxyanhydride (DMNB-L-Glu-NCA) (Scheme S1 and Fig. S1–S5).19 The resulting diblock copolymers are named as PEGₘ-b-PLₙ-X, where “ₘ” is the MW of PEG, “ₙ” is the degree of polymerization (DP) of polypeptides, and “X” refers to the stereochemistry of the amino acid residues of the polypeptide block (L, D or DL). Since previously reported polypeptide vesicles only have ~20 hydrophobic polypeptide repeating units in their bilayer structure,25,26,37–41 we first evaluated whether high MW polypeptides could be used to prepare vesicles with thick membranes and, thus, potentially improved stability. We synthesized PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₁₀₀ and used the co-solvent method42 to drive the formation of self-assembled structures. After water was dropwise added into the DMF solution of PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₁₀₀ macroscopic precipitation was observed instead of self-assembly, suggesting uncontrolled polypeptide chain interaction. The relatively short hydrophilic PEG block may not be able to prevent the random packing of rod-like polypeptides.25

Copolymers with reduced polypeptide DP were then synthesized in order to better control helix–helix packing for stable colloidal suspensions. Self-assemblies from three amphiphilic copolymers with shorter polypeptide lengths, PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₁₀, PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₂₀, and PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₄₀, were prepared. The α-helical conformation of the synthesized PL blocks in aqueous environment was confirmed by circular dichroism (CD) and ATR-FTIR spectroscopy (Fig. S6 and S7†). Based on the TEM analysis, we found that PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₂₀ could largely form hollow vesicular structures with a diameter around 400 nm through closure of the lamellar membrane (Fig. 2B). Such PEG/polypeptide ratio was found to be crucial to form stable vesicular morphology. PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₁₀ copolymers showed irregular membrane structures presumably because of the weak interaction of the ultra-short polypeptide (PL 10-mer) (Fig. 2A).26 PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₄₀ mainly formed large broken pieces of membrane likely due to the stiff nature of the PL 40-mer, which makes it difficult for the membrane to curve into vesicles (Fig. 2C).25 In addition, we noticed all three copolymer assemblies showed uncommonly high contrast on carbon film grids without staining. This observation was quite different from other amphiphiles with similar lengths (e.g., lipids), indicating a thick membrane structure (Fig. S8†).

In order to understand how copolymer composition and polypeptide conformation influence the assembly structure,25,26,38 we synthesized four more polypeptides with variable PEG lengths and polypeptide conformations. PEG₂₋₂-b-PL₂₀ and PEG₂₋₂-b-PL₄₀, with increased hydrophilic PEG size and bulkiness, showed the sheet-like typical bilayer membrane structures with low contrast in the absence of stain (Fig. 2D, E and Fig. S8†). The self-assembly of PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PL₂₀ and PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PDL₂₀ were also studied to elucidate the effects of polypeptide conformation on the self-assembled structures. CD analysis indicated PD segments adopted left-handed α-helical conformation, while the racemic PDL block only formed large compound micelles instead of 2D sheets (Fig. S7†). The self-assembly of PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PDL₂₀ and PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PDL₄₀ were also studied to elucidate the effects of polypeptide conformation on the self-assembled structures. CD analysis indicated PD segments adopted left-handed α-helical conformation, while the racemic PDL block showed a random-coil conformation with no Cotton effect (Fig. S8†). PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PD₂₀ assemblies exhibited similar hollow vesicular morphology with thick membranes, substantiating that the helical sense has no effect on the assembly behavior (Fig. 2F). Racemic PEG₁₅₋₁₅-b-PDL₂₀ only formed large compound micelles instead of 2D sheets (Fig. 2G),相似 as what was previously reported for polypeptide vesicles with random-coil hydrophobic polypeptide blocks.25,26 In the absence of side-by-side ordering of helical polypeptide rods, coil–coil diblock copolymers with pure hydrophobic effects cannot form stable bilayer membrane at relatively low hydrophobic-to-hydrophilic ratio.25,26,39

From the self-assembly behavior of the seven copolymers shown in Table 1, we have clearly shown that both morphology
and membrane structures of PEG-b-PL assemblies are governed not only by the block composition of amphiphiles but also the conformation of hydrophobic segments. The membrane structures of assemblies were also studied by cryogenic TEM (cryo-TEM) to confirm the difference between PEG1k-b-PL and PEG2k-b-PL assemblies. PEG1k-b-PL20 showed uniform, hollow vesicular structures with high contrast (Fig. 2H and Fig. S9†). The membrane thickness was estimated to be 40 nm, which is much thicker than typical bilayer structure (6 nm for two polypeptide blocks with DP = 20, assuming ideal α-helix). On the other hand, PEG2k-b-PL40 showed spherical sheets with much lower contrast (Fig. S9†).

We propose that the formation of the unusually thick membrane of PEG1k-b-PL is due to the further assembly of “unstable” bilayer sheets into a multilayer structure (Fig. 3).

Two interactions may play a role in the assembly of these multilayer structures. First, previous work on polypeptide based rod-coil amphiphiles demonstrates that the interactions between α-helical rigid rod-like hydrophobic segments first drive the formation of 2D bilayer sheets through anisotropic side-by-side ordering.25,26 Since conformational entropy loss during the segregation process of stiff helical polypeptides is insignificant, the minimization of interfacial energy dominates the assembly process of PEG-b-PL forming bilayer structures.2 Second, the interaction between the formed bilayer and the solvent is relatively high in energy, as the PEG is not long and bulky enough to fully solvate and stabilize the formed bilayer in the aqueous environment. This leads to higher interfacial energy at

![Table 1](https://example.com/table1.png)

**Table 1** The compositions of the PEG-b-polypeptide copolymers and their self-assembled structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Copolymer</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Morphology</th>
<th>Membrane</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PEG1k-b-PL10</td>
<td>PEG322-b-PL10</td>
<td>V, I</td>
<td>Multilayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEG1k-b-PL20</td>
<td>PEG322-b-PL22</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Multilayer</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>Bilayer</td>
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<td>PEG2k-b-PL40</td>
<td>PEG444-b-PL44</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Bilayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEG1k-b-PDL20</td>
<td>PEG222-b-PDL22</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Multilayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEG2k-b-PDL20</td>
<td>PEG222-b-PDL22</td>
<td>LCM</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a Obtained copolymer composition determined by 1H NMR. b Morphology determined visually from regular TEM images. V = vesicles; I = irregular aggregates; S = membrane sheets; LCM = large compound micelle. c Membrane structure determined by cryo-TEM images and SAXS results.
the hydrophobic–hydrophilic interface, resulting in unstable bilayers subject to further assembly for minimized interfacial energy. The bilayers assemble and form multilayer structures with PEG segments collapsed and buried between polypeptide helical domains and water molecules excluded between bilayers (Fig. 3). To our best knowledge, this is the first report of further assembly of unstable bilayers into densely packed multilayer membrane structures in polymersomes.

The use of PEG1k as the hydrophilic block is important in this polypeptide-based assembly system. PEG1k block is not only an effective separator to segregate the polypeptides, but also acts as a short and flexible unit connecting the helical layers. PEG2k, when used in the amphiphilic copolymer, provides sufficient solubilizing ability and bulkiness to hydrate and stabilize the bilayer membrane in aqueous solution, which prefers to form traditional bilayer membrane with low interfacial energy (Fig. 3). The increased size and hydrophilicity of PEG2k segments also make it difficult to be buried between layers of helices; therefore, PEG2k-b-PL assembled membranes resemble the previous reported polypeptide vesicle systems.25,26,37–40 which used sterically hindered hydrophilic polymer blocks including oligo(ethylene glycol) based z-helical polypeptides,25 glycopolypeptides,38,40 Y-shaped branched PEG, 39 or charged polypeptides that prevented close-packing of bilayers.26,37 Similar as PEG1k-b-PL, the further assembly of bilayers in these systems is therefore not favored considering the bulkiness or the charge repulsion of these hydrophilic segments.

To confirm the multilayered structures and further elucidate how PEG1k-b-PL amphiphiles were arranged in the membrane, small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS) and wide-angle X-ray scattering (WAXS) were used to analyze five assemblies in aqueous suspensions (Fig. 4A and B). In the SAXS regime, a Bragg peak was observed for the PEG1k-b-PL assembly at the characteristic repeat distances of \( d = 2\pi/q \) (nm): PEG1k-b-PL10 (\( d = 12.2 \)), PEG1k-b-PL20 (\( d = 13.4 \)), and PEG1k-b-PL40 (\( d = 18.5 \)). A weak second order Bragg peak was also observed for the PEG1k-b-PL40 sample (at \( d = 9.0 \) nm) (Fig. 4A). These results indicate the existence of a multilayer arrangement in all PEG1k-b-PL membranes, where each layer comprises about 8, 4, and 3 copolymer units of PEG1k-b-PL10, PEG1k-b-PL20, and PEG1k-b-PL40, respectively (assuming ideal z-helix, 0.15 nm per polypeptide repeating unit). The membrane thickness of self-assemblies, or in other words, the domain size \( L \) which relates to the number of layers in each membrane estimated by the full width at half maximum of the primary Bragg peaks, is determined to be \( L = 32, 42, 49 \) nm for PEG1k-b-PL10, PEG1k-b-PL20, and PEG1k-b-PL40, respectively (Fig. 1). The results correlate well with the membrane thickness observed by cryo-TEM of PEG1k-b-PL20 (40 nm). One should note that the Bragg reflections in the SAXS regime are rather broad. While there are many possible reasons for peak broadening, we should expect to obtain a local distribution of \( d \) spacings for PEG-b-PL assemblies due to the fact that the PEG moiety is flexible and may act as a ‘spring’ between hydrophobic PL units. In addition, the fact that there is no water within the multilayers affects the contrast of the X-ray signal. While the PEG domains make the peaks broader, it is also their size, relative to the polypeptide segment, affects the degree of ordering. For example, the PEG1k-b-PL10 membrane gives rise to the strongest Bragg peak intensity compared to other copolymers, indicating a more ordered smectic phase. The hydrophilic PEG domain is an effective separator to segregate the PL block, and also function as a ‘spring’ to compensate the geometrical mismatch of polypeptide layer. Increase of the polypeptide length, with reduced fraction of PEG1k, results in decreased segregation effects between helical domains and decreased geometrical compensation effects, eventually leading to uncontrolled packing (as PEG1k-b-PL100 mentioned above). Indeed, for the PEG3k-b-PL systems where the membrane can barely be observed or appears to be very thin in TEM, no Bragg reflections were detected by SAXS.

Fig. 4B shows the WAXS data obtained for all assemblies. A prominent reflection at the characteristic spacings of \( d = 2\pi/q \) (nm) is observed for all the samples: PEG1k-b-PL10 (\( d = 0.66 \)), PEG1k-b-PL20 (\( d = 0.71 \)), PEG1k-b-PL40 (\( d = 0.77 \)), PEG3k-b-PL20 (\( d = 0.75 \)), and PEG3k-b-PL40 (\( d = 0.77 \)). Regardless of segment length, these Bragg reflections result from the rise per turn as previously reported.44 In addition, we also observed another low intensity Bragg peak at low \( q \) (\( q = 4.5 \) nm\(^{-1} \)) before the most prominent peak at ca. \( q = 9 \) nm\(^{-1} \) for PEG3k-b-PL20. The corresponding distance 1.4 nm matches the diameter of z-helical polypeptides.45 This WAXS reflection arises from a lateral short range order of the polypeptides within the bilayer membrane as similarly observed in other z-helix systems.31 Through Gaussian peak fitting, the short range order domain size of PEG1k-b-PL20 vesicles in lateral direction is calculated as approximately 2.4 nm,
which corresponds to about two units. With more understandings on copolymer arrangement in the multilayer membranes from the X-ray scattering studies, it is clear that the multilayer membrane from PEG-b-PL assembly is structurally different from the liposomal MLV and other multilamellar polymosome as no water is found in the densely packed multilayer membrane structure (Fig. 1).7,46,47

When stimuli responsive functionalities are introduced in vesicle-forming polymeric amphiphiles, it is possible to control the morphological transition or membrane permeability, thus potentially broaden the application of polymersomes in encapsulation and delivery.10,11,14,22 As the copolymer has built-in photo-responsive PL domain, we next studied the trigger-induced disassembly of PEG1k-b-PL20 vesicles. Under UV irradiation, the cleavage of the 4,5-dimethoxy-2-nitrobenzyl (DMNB) ester bond results in the transition from the hydrophobic, α-helical PL to the anionic, random-coil poly(l-glutamic acid) (Fig. 1). The elimination of the PL helical structure was verified by CD spectroscopy (Fig. 5A). This conformation change, together with the change of amphiphilicity of the copolymer, induced the disassembly of vesicles. After 10 min UV irradiation, the turbid vesicle suspension became yellowish and clear, indicating the release of the DMNB moiety from the neighboring polypeptide layers for further assembly to eventually form the multilayered structures. Tuning copolymer composition and polypeptide conformation lead to the change of self-assembly morphology and membrane structures. When diblock copolymer composition is properly adjusted (PEG1k-b-PL20), a hollow vesicular morphology is obtained. UV irradiation alters polypeptide conformation and copolymer amphiphilicity, resulting in the complete disassembly of self-assembled structures.

The combination of thick membrane structures and trigger-responsive moieties in this new polypeptide vesicle may open new opportunities for the design of membranes of encapsulation and delivery systems with improved barrier properties. Meanwhile, the unique vesicle membrane structures may also provide new insights into the self-assembly behavior of rod-coil block copolymers, showing how precise control of block copolymer composition and secondary structure influence the molecular arrangement and eventually control the morphology and membrane structures of assemblies.

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