

The Options That Are Available to Us: The Least Likely/The Most Tolerable
Essay by Tammer El Sheikh

“The form of wood is altered by making a table out of it; nevertheless, this table remains wood, an ordinary material thing. As soon as it steps forth as a commodity, however, it is transformed into a material immaterial thing. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in the face of all other commodities it stands on its head and out of its wooden brain it evolves notions more whimsically that if it had suddenly begun to dance.”¹

-Karl Marx

Seripop’s installation entitled *The Options That Are Available to Us: The Least Likely/The Most Tolerable* (2012) extends Marx’s anthropomorphism with another couple of whimsical ‘material immaterial’ things – paper prints of carved wood, veneer, marble and stone. The work evokes the transformation of raw materials into objects of desire that so captivated Marx. But whereas Marx focused primarily on the fetishism of commodities, Yannick Desranleau and Chloe Lum reflect on how built spaces too acquire and transmit value.

On a tucked-away wall deep in the exhibition space, a blue paper layer, reminiscent of Antique friezes peels away to reveal an orange printed, faux-wood surface. The floor of the space is covered in a bright green layer of paper, with a labyrinthine print on it. At first the design evokes a topographical view of a vast fortress or space station in its network of sealed octagonal sectors, but the green coloring makes it seem homely – a bird’s eye view of the Death Star as a botanical garden! Upon closer inspection, generic coats-of-arms adorned with cherub heads appear between the walled-in octagonal sectors. The leafy Death Star is transformed suddenly into a replica of a low-relief woodcarving. From the rear of the gallery, a buckled layer of red paper faces the viewer. Before what looks like a 3-D model of some hallucinated geological process, the viewer is caught in a perfectly ambiguous encounter – is the floor receding or advancing, beckoning or threatening? The crumpled, red mound looks like a cheeky twenty-first century gloss on the Biblical Red Sea epic. Moses the accidental geologist serves up a lesson in plate tectonics and seafloor spreading. And again, a closer look reveals a new set of signifiers. The red paper is covered with a book-matched marble design. Veins intersect and diverge in spectral tangles morphing the printed surface of a Red Sea-floor mock-up into a Rorschach test!

Surfaces, here and elsewhere in Seripop’s *oeuvre* are mined for their connotative and iconographic potential. They are given a specific kind of depth. The pair’s work has long been concerned with architecture and urbanism. In *Hoarding Skin* (2011) and *Chandigarh is One* (2012) Seripop expose Le Corbusier’s modernist fantasy of total functionality as a flawed, precarious and deeply historical production process. Le

¹ Karl Marx, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 197. This passage from Marx is cited as well in art historian Johanne Sloan’s essay “Everyday Objects, Enigmatic Materials” in *La Triennale quebecoise, “le travail qui nous attend”*, Eds. M. Fraser, L. Johnstone et al. (Montreal, QC: Musee d’art contemporain de Montreal, 2012) p. 00.03.78. Seripop’s installation *Dis donc a la grosse de tasser* (2011) was included in the Triennale..

Corbusier's legacy is recast as a paper pile for abandoned ideas, and hollow, columnar monuments to tentatively realized ones. In *The Options*, once again fodder from the annals of art and architectural history is drawn into a playful critique. However, this time it is not the modernist era exclusively that is at issue. Rather, in *The Options*, Seripop interrogate a much longer material and conceptual history of architectural surfaces or "envelopes".²

Seripop's simulation of architectural surface decorations presents a partial inventory of luxury building materials – the glossy, ornate and earthy surfaces that have, throughout history, been selected to mark out and adorn property boundaries – as a paper-architecture experiment. This work, like others by Seripop, exposes the folly of utopian and speculative architectural schemes by literalizing paper-architecture – by cutting out middlemen and building straight away in paper. The ephemerality of the work is a reminder of the limits of 'best-laid architectural plans'. The architectural envelope can be understood here, and historically as a site of politics – as both a surface and a mechanism for containing social space.³ A first critical gesture then, is contained in Seripop's indulgence in artifice, or in their replication of precious and 'original' building materials as peeling and buckled layers in a playfully colored ruin. The emperor isn't quite naked but his clothes are knock-offs.

There is a second moment of critique in *The Options*, indicated in the title. Seripop invite a reflection on what philosopher Slavoj Žižek has called the transcendental *a priori* of architecture – namely the distinction between inside and outside, between surface and structure.⁴ Seripop's work is pitted against the orthodoxy of the distinction. Their critique operates in a political register and in a more philosophical one as well. 'Two options' are represented in the use of layered chromatic compliments in the work. This play of merely *accidental* changes is underscored by the artifice of the simulated *substances* in the work (marble, wood etc.). The choice between political parties in a *de facto* two-party system, Desranleau notes, often feels the same – only superficial changes are possible. So much for conventional politics, but what about cultural politics, what about architecture? In Žižek's estimation, architecture is called upon in the postmodern age to acknowledge its profound social responsibility and provide for spaces between the functional inside and aestheticized outside of a building, between private and public spaces. These third spaces are real and imagined for Žižek but all too frequently disavowed.⁵ In architectural terms, they are the spaces that result incidentally from other prioritized design decisions. Spandrels, attics, cellars and the gaps generated by doors and fenestration are liminal but promising sites for an imaginative re-appropriation of the built environment according to Žižek. It is no wonder, he claims, that these are the preferred dwellings of monsters,

² On this politicized conception of architectural surfaces see Alejandro Zaera Polo, "The Politics of the Envelope: A Political Critique of Materialism" *Volume 17* (Sept. 2008) p. 76-105.

³ In his proposal for a "political ecology of the building envelope", Alejandro Zaera Polo describes the surface of a building as a site of social, political and psychological "attachments". "The Politics of the Envelope: A Political Critique of Materialism" *Volume 17* (Sept. 2008) p. 78-9.

⁴ See Slavoj Žižek's chapter entitled "The Architectural Parallax" in *Living in the End of Times* p. 259

⁵ See Slavoj Žižek's chapter entitled "The Architectural Parallax" in *Living in the End of Times* (New York: Verso, 2010) p. 277

criminals and aliens in the sci-fi/horror imaginary.⁶ Seripop's latest work seems to take up just this notion of an imaginative re-appropriation of the spaces behind, underneath or tucked out of sight in the built environments we take for granted.

Seripop's re-enchantment of raw materials sustains the mystery of the table's "wooden brain" described by Marx. Desranleau and Lum invite us to play along in their game of architectural hide and seek. With her characteristic wit and irreverence, Lum says of *The Options*: "this is our Scooby Doo moment, we are peeling back masks to reveal others" – *ad infinitum*. The game goes on.

⁶ See Slavoj Žižek's chapter entitled "The Architectural Parallax" in *Living in the End of Times* (New York: Verso, 2010) p. 260