

Modern Isolation *Frigolite* by Michel François

– CHRISTOPHE VAN GERREWEY –

Expanded polystyrene comes in lots of forms and under lots of names. It is known as *piepschuim* in Dutch; *Styropor* and *Styrofoam* are American brand names; the noun *isomo* (short for *isolation moderne* in French and 'easy modelling' in English) is considered Belgian-Dutch; *frigolite* is seen as Belgian-French for polystyrene used as packing material.

The material is also present in a variety of ways in the work of the Belgian artist Michel François (1956), although it is always reduced to the smallest physical building blocks: white polystyrene balls. In 1988, for instance, he made the piece *Ex-fenêtre*: a curved wall with twelve wooden frames, blocked up with little balls of this type. *Une expiration dans le plâtre* (1989) is a block of white plaster mixed with the same material, in which a hemisphere has been hollowed out – a technique he used again in *Deux expirations dans le plâtre* (1991). François made beds out of polystyrene in 1996 (*Deux lits*), and in 1998 he covered the leaves of a house plant with honey and stuck crumbled polystyrene onto them. The video *Casse Frigolite* dates from 1997. In it, a sheet of polystyrene is broken up into progressively smaller pieces. And in 1992 François made the video *Frigolite*, his most explicit application of the material: a large amount of polystyrene presses against a glass wall and is filmed from beneath, so that about fifty little balls at a time – in the first layer of the image – are visible as black, circular silhouettes, while other balls pile up above them and the stack is invisibly illuminated. In the meantime, the material moves: it is pressed down or subjected to an air current. There is a constant commotion running through the image, which scrapes and grinds. The frame of the screen remains motionless: it is never clear how big this mass of polystyrene is or what kind of receptacle contains it.

Frigolite has been shown as a video at, among others, the Festival International du Film de la Rochelle in 2004. Since 2011, however, it has also been part of the public space in Antwerp – not once but





three times. *Frigolite* is projected from the inside onto the exterior of the first, second and third floors of the Pulcinella youth hostel on Bogaardeplein, in the historic city centre, near the Police Tower. This plaza was once a disused, slightly dilapidated small park, popular with local people. In its remodelled form it is dominated on one side by the youth hostel designed by Vincent Van Duysen Architecten. Van Duysen's approach is often criticized as tasteful in a sterile, formal and exaggerated way – something that can be partially applied to the interior of the youth hostel. The exterior on Bogaardeplein likewise comprises a sober and neutral concrete grid, aestheticized by a number of design decisions and deviations.

François has taken familiar images or obvious phenomena in other works too and twisted them so that they no longer fit. With this reprise of an earlier film, he similarly aims to break through and disrupt the screen erected by architecture. This is not even a direct response to the youth hostel. Urban renewal – a necessary and unavoidable process, which constantly replaces the original self-evidence and anonymity of a place with artificiality and somewhat unreal newness – is much more significant. No matter how well Bogaardeplein has turned out, perhaps better even than many other urban renewal projects, this remodelled and until recently forgotten place, still exudes a certain artificiality, especially for those familiar with how it used to be. The three-fold presence of *Frigolite* might focus that presence but also counteracts it.

The work is an enigma, even before we seek to interpret it. A passing shopper taking a short-cut from the Meir to Nationalestraat cannot tell what he or she is looking at: a video of wriggling cigarette filters; a room filled with balloons; a flawed decorative pattern? And most of all, what is it doing here in this place? It is precisely this lack of clarity and this contesting of self-evidence that makes a city a city. And then there is the pleasure of the initiate and the art-lover, who can deepen his or her immediate experience of *Frigolite* with a layered and ironic play of meanings. Because polystyrene is both a packaging and an insulating material: as if some of the windows of the youth hostel have not yet been unpacked, or the building is so well insulated that it has become isolated. The most important operation in the film is, however, the zoom – the polystyrene is not only pulverized, the little balls are also

enlarged to monstrous proportions. In this way, a synthetic material – along with its immediate surroundings – is not only reduced to a nucleus, that nucleus exists an infinitely large number of times and remains as intriguing as it is incomprehensible.