

Scrap Metal per Kilo Karl Philips at CIAP, Hasselt (BE).

[This text talks about *Foreign Legion*, the first institutional solo exhibition by Karl Philips (CIAP, 22.03—01.06.14).]

Karl Philips has been developing a beautiful body of work over several years now. His oeuvre is based on the ‘extra’ spaces in our society: public spaces that are left unkempt, but which can be easily repurposed into private space. Examples of this practice (not on show at CIAP) are Philips’ mobile apartments attached to a billboard (*Concierge*, 2010), or the project that presented people with the opportunity to live inside roadside-billboards and to live on the proceedings of the advertisements on their temporary homes (*Good/Bad/Ugly*, 2012).

At CIAP, lots of new work is displayed, showing how the practice of Philips has expanded into society. Interesting to me is Philips’ thorough research on aesthetics, which revealed new domains for him to work in. One example of this new ‘playing fields’ is the work about Colruyt, a big supermarket famous for its claim to ‘the lowest price on the market’. This idea is supported by the Spartan aesthetics of the store. Philips is interested in the way public spaces sometimes disguise themselves as private spaces by dressing a room, for example by putting out some houseplants. Colruyt has turned this idea around and tries to make its stores as impersonal as possible. Philips reacts on this strategies by applying his own aesthetics to them: recreating the ‘sample tables’, used in Colruyt to offer tastings to the shoppers, in his own, more crude materials. Displays are made of iron used to fortify concrete, trays are not plastic but made of wood. Philips put one of these sample tables in a Colruyt store and filled it with crisps. “I did nothing illegal,” he says, “but maybe one of the employees has refilled my tray as well as their own”.

The most impressive feat of the exposition is the old-fashioned railway trolley, used by railroad employees to navigate between stations. However, this trolley made by Philips is designed, in collaboration with an engineer, to be used on the guardrails next to highways, thereby offering an alternative, handpowered mode of transportation. The route of the trolley runs through the entire exposition, beautifully tying the entire show together.

Further in the exposition, we encounter three polyester replicas of sleeping cabins used in transportation trucks. These are forbidden in our country. The sleeping cabinets are tethered to three scaffold constructions with the same dimensions as a truck. We see three large boxes, used for storing tools but a popular hiding place for stowaway refugees. The last scaffolding ‘truck’ pierces the wall of an adjacent room, where two videos are on display; one about the installment of the sampling tray at Colruyt, the other one is called *Genk-Blankenberge-Genk*. This last video shows Philips taking the longest trip the Belgian railroad has to offer. Wedged between two seats, the artist is trying to blend into the background, wearing a sweater with the same pattern as the chairs. Another video, *Wegde*, is a compilation of twelve registrations of a performance, filmed with smartphones. Twelve associates of the artist entered a bank using their card, leaving a wedge between the door when they left, thereby opening up the place to those without a card, and literally opening up this semi-public place. A bit further, we encounter a welded ‘bull bar’, attached to trucks to protect them in the event of a crash but more often used by the drivers to hang up their laundry. A candy machine standing against a wall is rigged with a device, designed to snatch the contents from the machine.

Outside are three copies of the sloping backside of trucks, fridges strapped on, reminiscent of the way merchants in old iron keep the heaviest object towards the back of the truck, so they don’t have to carry them too far when unloading. These last works were originally made for another exposition, but Philips rightfully felt they work better here, against a whitewashed wall. The artist made good use of the space and is happy with it, as he points out the pile of scrap metal you can see from the first floor.

Anyhow. This text is in no way representative for the exposition, works and thoughts of Karl Philips. I do not want to burden the works with stifling theoretics, neither can I adequately represent the poetic way in which this artist talks about his work. Go see it, please. It is worth your effort.

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