

# The Fine Art of Word Slicing

*In "room pieces" composed of metal pipes, black tape and adhesive letters, Brussels-based American-born artist Peter Downsbrough playfully engages the logic of linguistic and spatial order.*

BY SARAH MCFADDEN

*The mark of the philosopher is to doubt what is usually taken for granted, and to think how everything could "just as easily" be otherwise. . . . It is a way of questioning the stereotyped habits of the mind, since only a willful disruption of the usual certainties will liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation.*

Suzi Gablik, *Magritte*, 1970

**F**our years ago, Peter Downsbrough's retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts<sup>1</sup> in Brussels caught people off guard. The exuberance and material diversity of his spatio-linguistic propositions, which ranged from architecturally probing room pieces<sup>2</sup> made from adhesive lettering and taped lines to videos and modestly produced books, stood in marked contrast to the stark sobriety of the artist's signature *Two Poles* and *Two Pipes* sculptures. Begun in the 1970s, those radically spare works consisted of a pair of identical wood dowels or standard-issue metal pipes cut to different lengths and juxtaposed 3 inches apart. Outdoors they were deployed as parallel uprights; indoors, one of the elements was suspended from the ceiling and descended to a level below the top of the one rising from the floor, so that the two were seen to overlap or to bracket a view. What you perceived depended upon where you stood. (The indoor works are still shown occasionally.)

The concentrated, mute tensions of those early pipe pieces provided the basis for an oeuvre that is at once rigorous and intuitive, terse and rich in implication, and endowed with a delectable sense of humor. By literally directing attention to the way the world around us is constructed and organized, Downsbrough's cryptic and often playfully engaging works prompt reflections on the underlying logic of the social, economic and political orders they accent and illuminate.

His strategy recalls Bertolt Brecht's in theater. Brecht felt (in the words of Yve-Alain Bois) that "one must present the spectator with a riddle, give him or her the theoretical means with which to solve it, and leave it at that. It is up to the audience to find the solution, to wake to a political consciousness."<sup>3</sup> There is no solution as such, no single correct way of interpreting Downsbrough's word-based works. Rather, they suggest more generally that everything might just as easily be otherwise.

The main structural components of this art are individual words, mostly conjunctions, prepositions and adverbs isolated from any grammatical context that would confer meaning, along with straight black lines pulled directly from rolls of tape and, importantly, the intervals in between. Visually and physically the words and lines share color, adhesive quality and proximity. All these compositional elements are deployed in two and three dimensions and in small and large scale. They are rendered by means of typography and layout in his books,<sup>4</sup>

which are the cornerstone of his art (he has produced more than 50 since 1968), and as aluminum pipes plus black tape and adhesive lettering in the wall and room pieces, which are its triumphs.

Downsbrough has the lines and words fabricated in steel for his public sculptures. He also overlays them as tape and adhesive lettering to reframe and punctuate the architectural views on commercial postcards, photographs and video stills and the diagrammed spaces of maps. The maps that he reproduces in books and prints and also shows as wall-mounted pieces typically feature road networks, canals or straits—channels for the flow of goods, people and ideas. The approximate parallels formed by the contours of these passages echo the motif of the early *Two Pipes* and their two-dimensional equivalents, the two vertical lines that he frequently inscribes in his works to channel our gaze.

**D**ownsbrough had already expanded his post-Minimalist practice well beyond the pipe pieces before he moved from New York to Brussels in 1989, but apart from a few small gallery shows and, in 1980, a four-day run of his 30-second spot *The Dice* on Times Square's Spectacolor Board, it received scant exposure. Even in Europe, where he is widely admired and increasingly visible, exhibitions encompassing a broad spectrum of his art are relatively rare. One such, mounted last fall at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent, captured the cogency of his manifold output. Slotted into the museum's "Focus" series, which helps to increase appreciation for isolated works in the collection by placing them in meaningful contexts, the show centered on a large room piece from 1985, *PAR/ DÉS-ORDRE/ DE, OR*. Acquired by S.M.A.K. in 1998, the work had been shown only twice before—in 1986 and 1999—and never in the museum itself.<sup>5</sup>

Given carte blanche to select and install the exhibition in seven contiguous ground-floor spaces that included a screening room and a cathedral-ceilinged, skylit corridor, Downsbrough presented nearly the complete range of his work: only sound recordings and outdoor sculpture were omitted. Newly created or published for the occasion were two room pieces, four wall pieces, a map piece, a black-and-white video and a series of 12 overprinted postcards. From the last three years came a freestanding steel sculpture made of two square frames welded to either side of the vertically oriented word "and," as on the spine of a wide-open book; inkjet drawings of single and paired words in block letters; a series ("One Week") of seven freehand drawings presenting variations on the placement of a pair of vertical lines and the word "and"; a woodblock multiple and a couple of architectural maquettes, also word-bearing. The previous three decades were represented by a selection of black-and-white photographs of city

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**Downsbrough often presents words in mirror image to suggest space folding upon itself or to give an impression of seeing from behind, from another angle.**

scenes tightly framed, geometrically regimented and, except for one, without human figures.

Like the other room pieces, *PAR/DÉS-ORDRE/DE, OR* filled an entire gallery. A comparatively elaborate, multipolar dispersion,<sup>6</sup> it contains three rows (of five, seven and eleven units) of black pipes hanging from ceiling to floor like loosely composed screens (when up close and parallel to a wall) or room dividers, plus an identical pipe hanging on its own close to a wall. A line of tape demarcating a large open volume runs parallel to the floor across two perpendicular walls, then descends vertically to the floor where (in white to contrast with the dark stone surface) it continues its orthogonal course until ending at a seemingly arbitrary point. Shorter strips of tape on walls and floor suggest edges or conjure planes of other incomplete volumes. Three short red hanging pipes triangulate the space overhead, and the words of the title are disposed on two adjacent walls and on the floor.

In an early instance of a technique that Downsbrough has subsequently developed into a powerful sculptural idiom, linear elements slice through a single letter and a word: the two halves of the vertically riven "o" in "ordre" bracket a hanging pipe, and the longest line on the floor horizontally bisects the preposition "de" (of). Thus the conventional form of "order" is disrupted and the ubiquitous but largely ignored word *de* opened up to scrutiny.

Seen from a fixed point, the pipes can be difficult to distinguish from vertical lines taped flat to the wall. Only by changing position and detecting parallax or shadow is the viewer able to determine which lines are flat marks and which are free-hanging cylindrical objects. The visual ambiguity of these elements together with the widely scattered words and word fragments draw the spectator into and around the space of the work in order to ascertain its physical makeup and literally piece together its possible meanings. The longer one explores the work, the more it yields.

Casting an eye from left to right over the walls and down to the floor of *PAR/DÉS-ORDRE/DE, OR*, one obtains the syntactical word sequence given in the title. "Dés," a prefix meaning "dis" and also a noun, "dice," is separated from but appears on the same wall as "ordre." The mind naturally fuses the two words to form *désordre*. In the light of his own dice projects (in addition to the animated LED spot shown in Times Square, they include a film, multiples, unique objects and a book), the artist surely relished the pun as well as the shared associations of dice and disorder with randomness and chance. The French expression "*dans l'ordre des choses*" ("in the scheme of things") scans similarly to the title and seems to hover in the background, banished by its near-opposite, "disorder." The room's two architectural schemes—one constructed and actual, the other visually suggested in outline form—correspond to the notions of order and disorder, with disorder understood as any change in the status quo.

Downsbrough's humor and virtuosity—his sheer brilliance in working a space—came to the fore in *CONTAIN/ SIC*, a merry duet for space and language conceived for this show. An inexact open rectangle made from tape, it spanned two perpendicular walls and jumped the open corner (the gallery's doorless entryway) between them. The bottom horizontal on the left-hand wall was only a fraction of the length it needed to be to join the vertical on the far left. That vertical element, by contrast, was longer than was necessary. It carried on its dangling extremity the first three letters of the word "contain," the final four letters of which descended unsupported into the void. "Contain" thus demonstrated its own fallacy. As if to acknowledge the potential treachery of all language,

"sic" appeared in the wide gap created by the too-short horizontal and was echoed in mirror image on the opposite wall.

*DIVERT/ TO* exemplified the sculptural force that Downsbrough has plowed into the fine art of word-slicing. Unlike *CONTAIN/ SIC*, this wall piece denoted the action it named. The work's large scale evoked the muscular heft of a titan who had heaved the rock-solid horizontal top half of "divert" to the opposite end of a long wall, where it had landed as a columnar upright. In the process, the word's bottom half appeared to have been pulled most of the way off its black-painted rectangular base. The effects of cleaving and displacement were evidenced in graphic reversals: the bottom half of the word was spelled out in black letters on a white ground; the top half appeared in white letters on black, as did its reversed image, which was painted on a freestanding column directly opposite. Downsbrough frequently presents words in mirror image in all the mediums he works with. When used as a doubling device, the effect is often that of space folding upon itself; when presented independently, reversed words give the impression of being seen from behind, implying a frontal view on the other side of the supporting surface—another angle, a different perspective.

Downsbrough's videos are mostly silent, mostly black-and-white and relatively short. *As/ In*, presented at S.M.A.K., lasts 10 minutes and is composed of painstakingly slow, grainy pans and traveling shots that invoke John Cage's advice: "If you are bored with something after two minutes, keep doing it for four minutes. If you stay bored, do it for eight . . ." and so on. The camera pauses outside the quiet entrance of a glass-walled, high-rise office complex before beginning a visual crawl through the naked flexi-space of an unoccupied floor above. Bird's-eye views of a busy highway cloverleaf, a railway line and a parking lot, seen through partly reflective windows, bring it to another temporary halt. Small printed words—"as," "and"—pop up individually at long intervals—tiny but startling incongruities in the visual field. The video ends as it begins, with the word "and," thus underscoring its link-in-the-chain position in Downsbrough's cumulative, open-ended body of work. Especially after one experiences the photographs and room pieces, books and map pieces, the formal intelligence of this essay on the shaping of the contemporary world becomes clear. And by extension, so does its subtext concerning the vital importance of paying close heed to the structures and systems shaping our lives.

The final work, encountered at the exit, was the show's simplest and pithiest. The one-word wall piece "Naar" (Dutch for "toward"), disposed vertically and bisected to form a wide channel between its two halves, seemed to connect the exhibition to the world beyond, toward which departing visitors were heading—attentively, one hopes. □

1. "Position," curated by Marie-Thérèse Champesme at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (June 25-Sept. 7, 2003), traveled to l'Espace de l'Art Concret, Mouans-Sartoux, France (Oct. 25, 2003-Feb. 1, 2004), and the Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz, Poland (Mar. 23-May 9, 2004).

2. Downsbrough uses this term rather than "installation" because of that word's associations with site-specificity and impermanence.

3. Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America*, April 1988, p. 167.

4. Downsbrough avoids the formulation "artist's books" for its connotations of rarity and high price. His own editions are unlimited, unsigned and inexpensive.

5. The piece was shown at Le Consortium, Dijon, in 1986, and in the Belfry of Bruges in 1999.

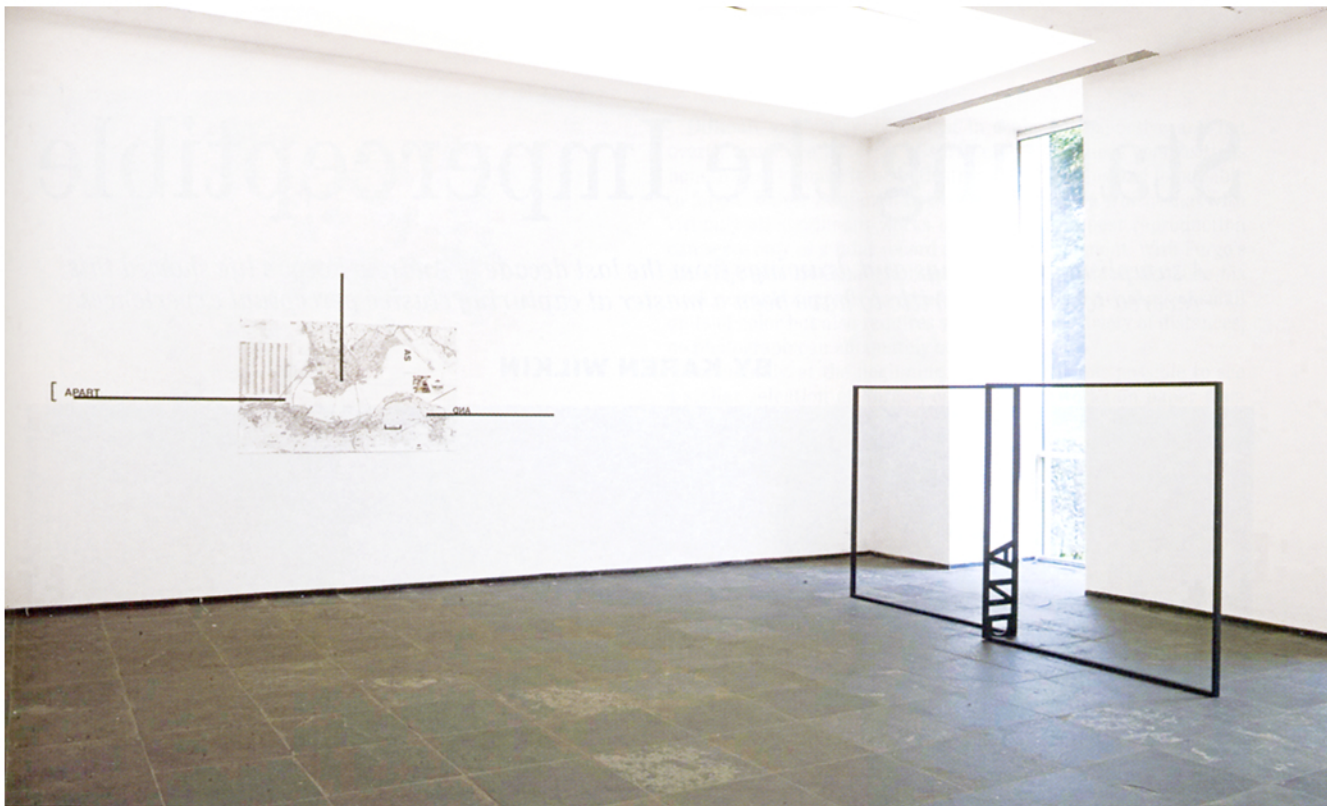
6. The term is taken from Christian Besson, "When the Work(s) Interpret the Work(s)," *Position*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 2003, p. 154.

"Focus/Peter Downsbrough" was on view at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent [Oct. 10, 2006-Jan. 14, 2007]. Two programs of Downsbrough videos (five each) were on view at the Reina Sofía in Madrid [Sept. 17-29]; Erna Hecec Gallery, Brussels, published a new portfolio of photographs, 11 Vertical Photographs, in October; a new book, [TILL, is to be issued by Edition Jannink, Paris, this fall; and a new video, [AND HERE, will have its first public screenings in Brussels and in Kent, U.K., in November. A solo show is scheduled for Galerie Cent 8, Paris, in June 2008.

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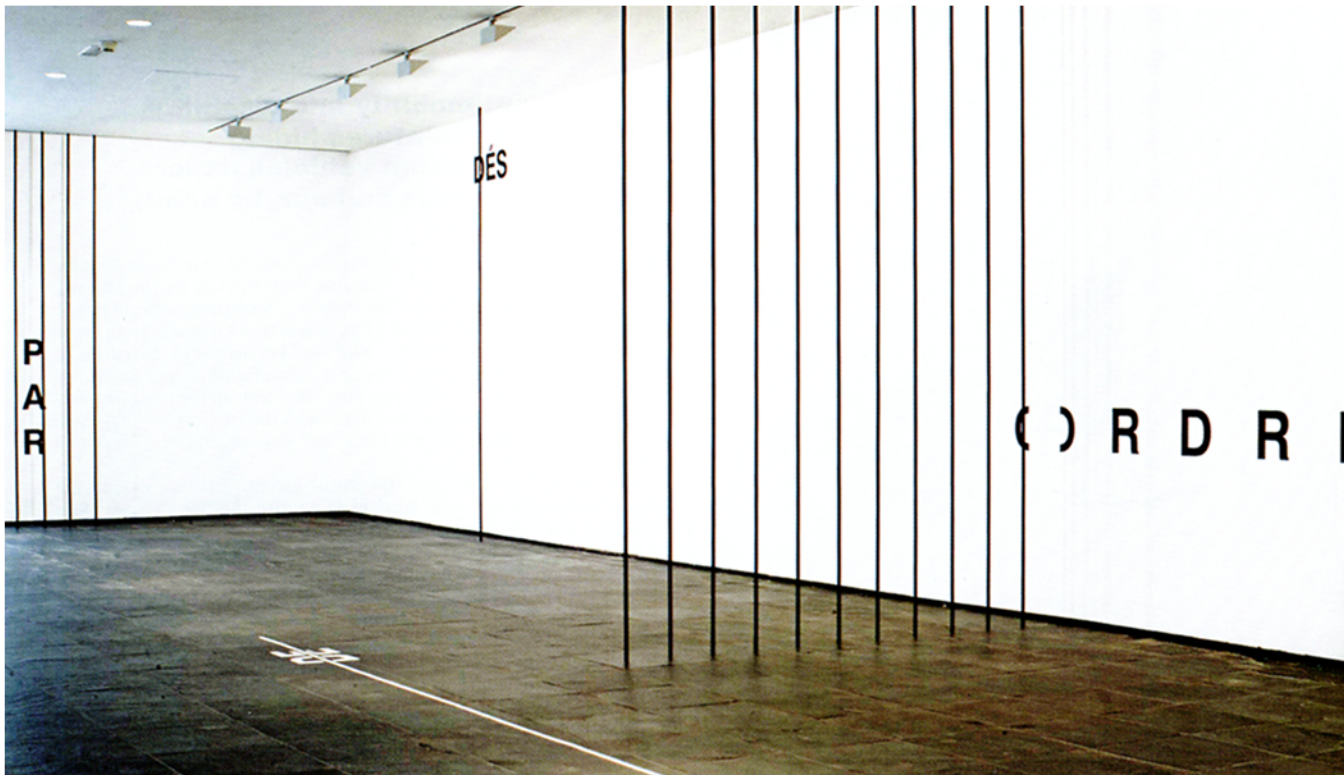
Left, AND-APART-AS, 2006, photocopied map, adhesive tape and letters, approx. 4 by 11 feet overall; right, AND, 2003, painted steel, approx. 5 by 10 by 1 feet.

Partial view of DIVERT/ TO, 2006, paint, adhesive letters, dimensions variable. Courtesy Galerie Erna Hecey, Brussels.



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Partial view of Peter Downsbrough's PAR/ DÉS-ORDRE/ DE, OR, 1985, adhesive tape and letters, aluminum pipes, dimensions variable. Collection Flemish Community.

CONTAIN/ SIC, 2006, adhesive tape and letters, 5½ by 18¾ feet (including corner gap).

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Dirk Pauwels, courtesy Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent.



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