

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,⁶ 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 Hecey 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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