

# 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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