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PETER DOWNSBROUGH  
 UN HOMMAGE / A TRIBUTE

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## PASS, SET, INTERPOSE. PETER DOWNSBROUGH'S FILMS BETWEEN STASIS AND MOVEMENT

“Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1958: §65)

Writing about Peter Downsborough's photographic work makes it impossible to understand photography as a singular entity in the sense that we can determinate, on the basis of an ontological enquiry, what, generally speaking, photography *is* or what, as a single picture, a photograph really *means*. Whether appearing individually, as sequences in books, in spatial relationships in the gallery space or in their relation to films, Downsborough's photographs open onto a wide range of uses and contexts according to which their perception and meaning constantly shift. They are documents of other works by the artist, they can be perceived as formal compositions in their own right, they reflect on their particularities as photographs, and often they are elements of larger projects such as books, exhibitions or films. To pursue the analogy with Wittgenstein's language-games, they are parts “of an activity, or of a form of life.”<sup>[1]</sup> Put differently, they re-actualize their meaning and function according to their surroundings at a given time and in a given space.

To put it in a nutshell, Downsbrough's work is based on ideas of relation, context and shifting functions and meanings rather than engaging with traditional (modernist) values such as autonomy, medium specificity and uniqueness. I would like to discuss the implications of such an aesthetic concept for the relationship between photographic still images and moving filmic images. I will focus on three terms that I believe perfectly represent the dynamic interaction between photography, film, and other media in Downsbrough's work: pass, set, interpose.

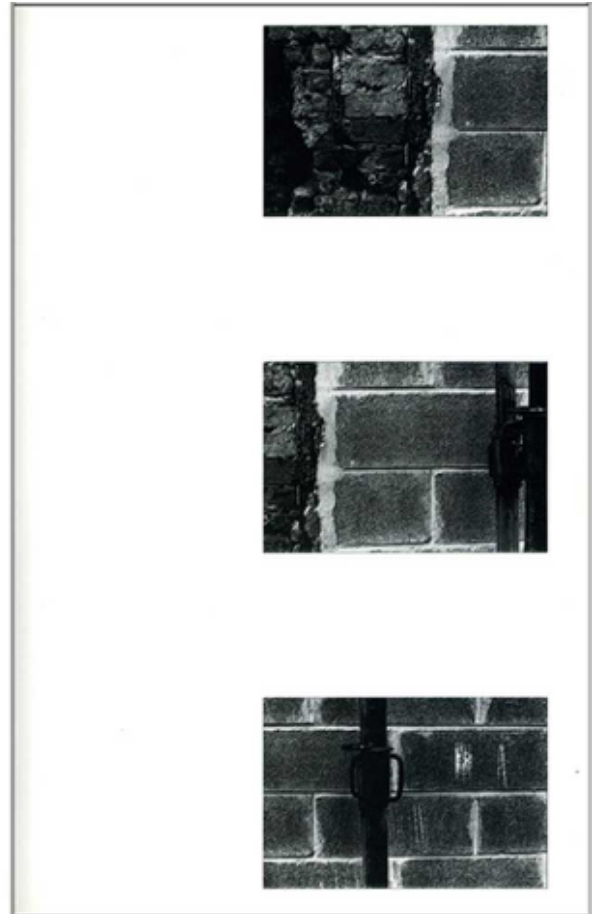
The common definition of "to pass" is "to go by," "to go across or over" / "to cross" (i.e. a stream or a threshold), "to proceed," "to move onward," "to go away," and "to take place." All of these expressions mark a transition, which is also contained in the adjective "passing" as something transitory, fleeting, and the noun "pass," referring to the act of a person or thing that passes or causes something to pass. "Interpose" means "to place between," "to mediate," and thus assumes an intervening position or relation between two things. Finally, "to set" signifies "to put something in a particular place or position," but also "to place in some relation to something" or "to put into some condition." The noun, in turn, expresses not only the act or state of setting or being set, but also a collection or a combination of things. Of particular interest here is the idiom "Ready! Set! Go!", for it suggests that "set" refers to a condition that hovers between stasis and movement, a state of "being prepared to go," neither stationary nor moving. In fact, all of Downsbrough's films explore such transitional states by confronting various temporalities, spatial realities and media forms.

## ***PASS-ING***

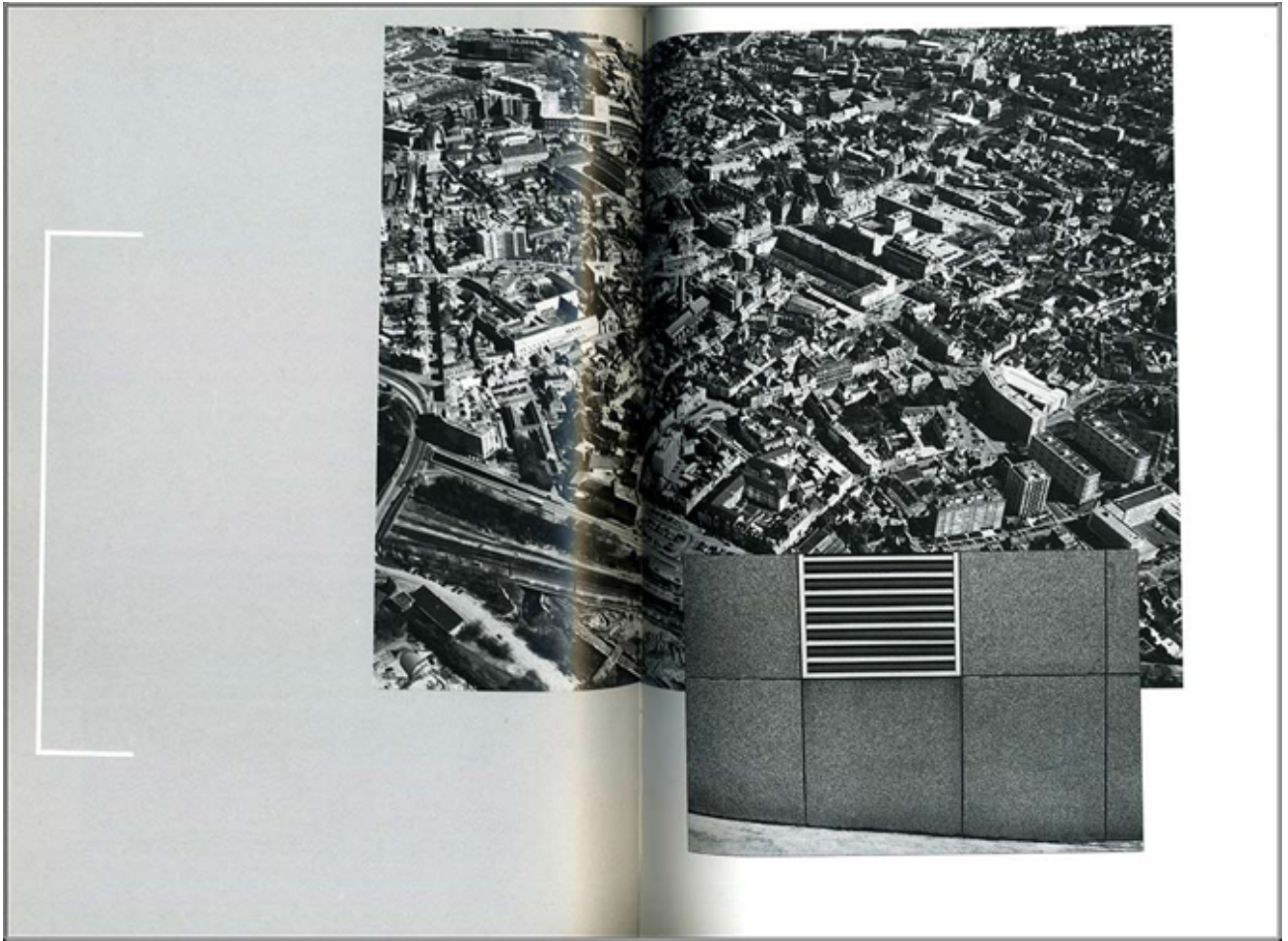
*PASS-ING* (2002) is a perfect example for the ways how in Downsbrough filmic work images pass from one medium to the other in order to explore the interstices between stasis and movement. The video has been made on the occasion of an exhibition in Valenciennes, for which Downsbrough also produced the book *EN PLACE* (2002). Together, film and book constitute two different but interdependent ways to explore the urban environment and industrial area of Valenciennes.



*EN PLACE* (2002)



*EN PLACE* contains aerial and satellite photographs of the city as well as photographs of buildings, street views, parking lots and construction details. The images define the place in two different ways. First of all, it is striking that there are no total views. The city can be experienced only by means of the aerial pictures, taken from an extreme distance so that only the macro-structure of the urban fabric can be identified, or by means of details that show the micro-structure, the material and formal characteristics of the constructions. In a conversation with Marie-Thérèse Champesme, Downsborough specifies: “The aerial views show the structure of the city, the detail photographs show the structure of the material.”<sup>[2]</sup>

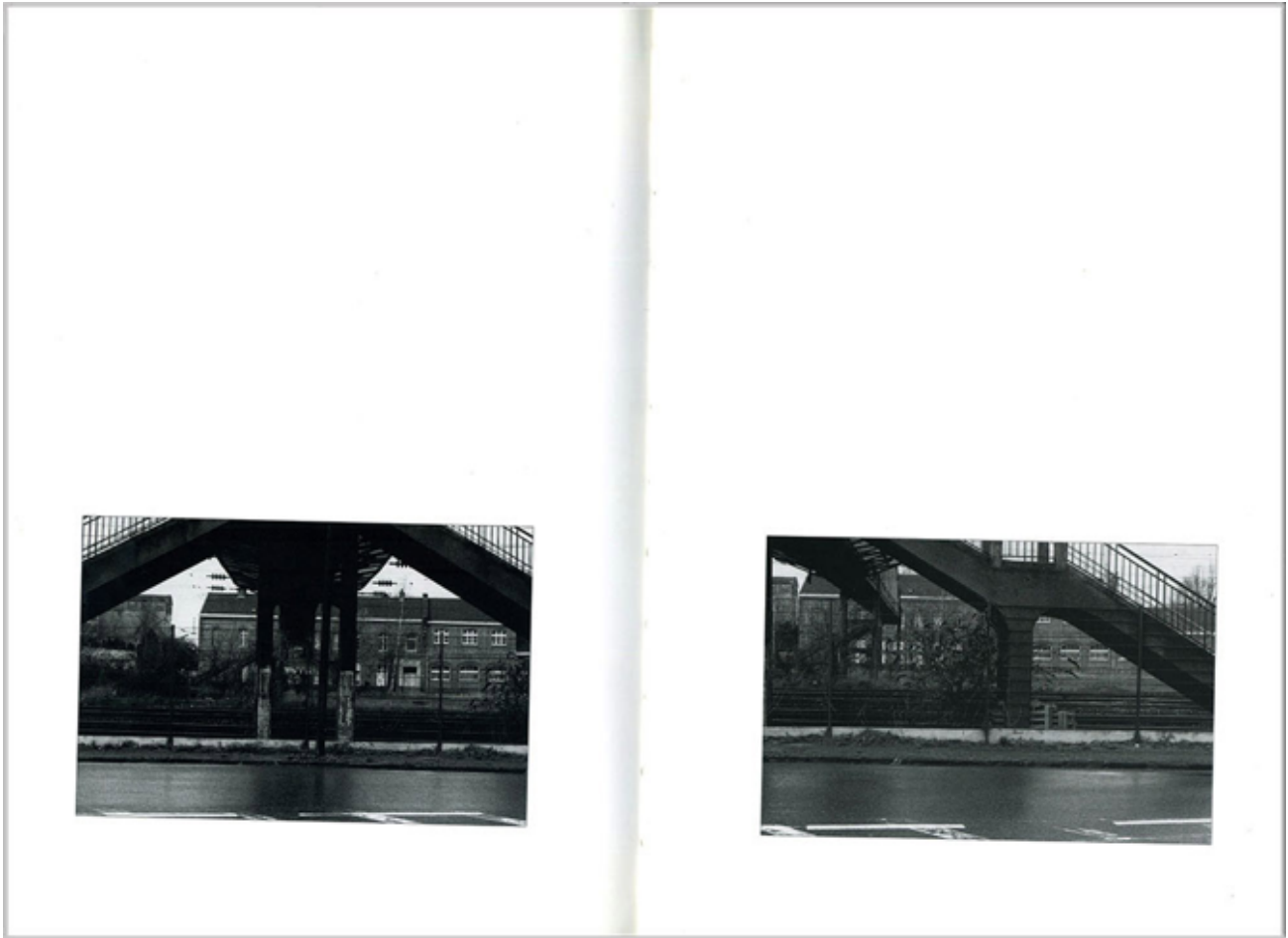


*EN PLACE* (2002)

On one page the close-up of a wall is superimposed over an aerial view. An enormous bracket frames the two images suggesting that they open and close a large parenthesis containing virtually every imaginable image of the city. The cinematographic character of the pictures reproduced in the book is confirmed by their sequential arrangement imitating both a fixed camera filming moving objects and a moving camera filming stationary objects.







*EN PLACE* (2002)

*PASS-ING* is precisely based on such kind of travelling shots along the facades of abandoned industrial sites in the peripheries of Valenciennes. But while *EN PLACE* emphasizes the placement ('MISE EN PLACE') of both the buildings in the city and the photographs in the book, *PASS-ING* is about movement and the passing of time – the historical time of the disused factory and the actual time it needs to pass along one side of the building. While the conjunctive words 'AND' 'BETWEEN' 'AS' that appear during the film may express temporal and spatial relationships, the word 'SET', in its verbal form, may be interpreted as a reminiscence of the 'mise en place' of the book; as a noun it may also be read as 'film set' and refer thus to the conditions of the film's production.



Still from *PASS-ING* (2002)

### Shifting Places and Locations

To understand the complex relationship between the moving and the still image in Downsbrough's photographic and filmic work, it is necessary to go back in time to the beginnings of his sculptural work. Already his minimalistic pieces from the second half of the 1960s could be described in terms of Pass-ing, Set-ing and Interpose. Take *Chalk Square* from 1968.



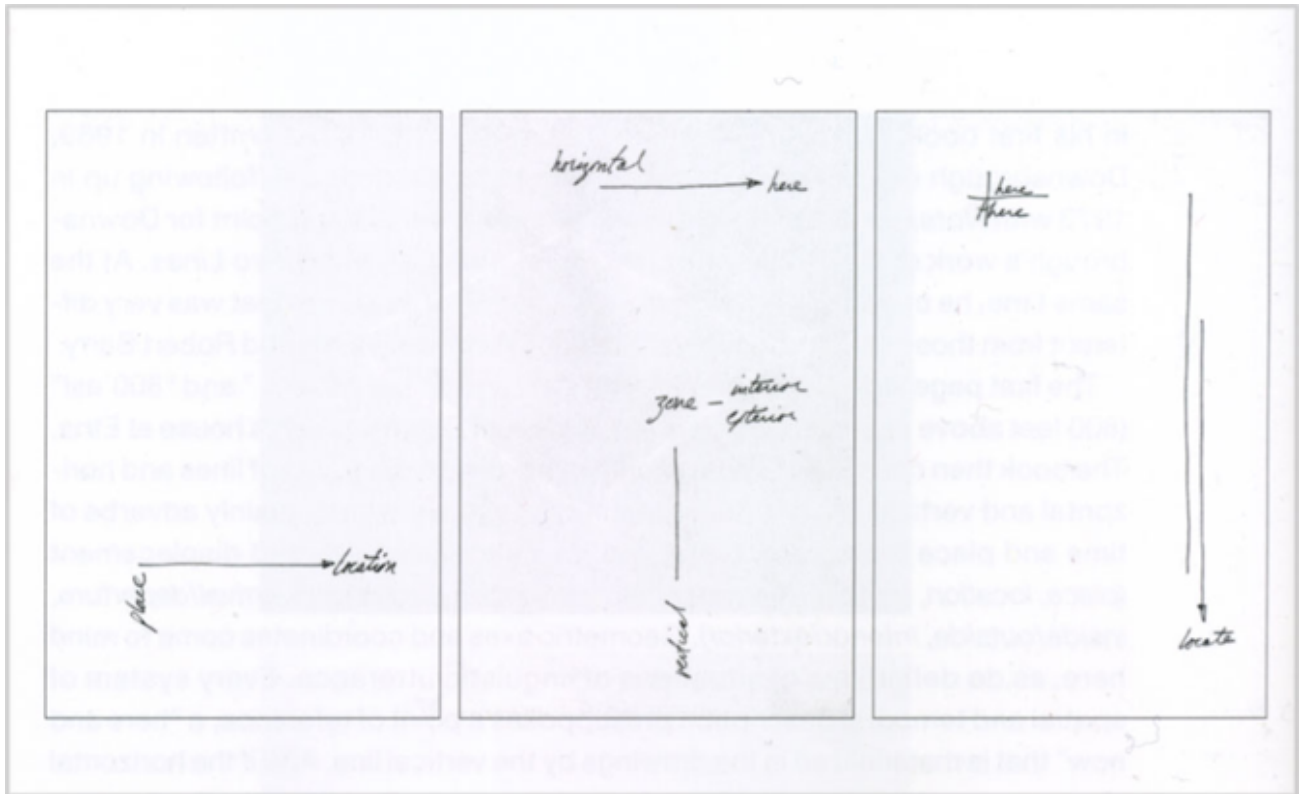
*Chalk Square*, Etna, New Hampshire (1968)

The work consists of a simple square traced in the snow with red chalk. The thin chalk line is the demarcation line between inside and outside, form and content, nature and culture relative to which the spectator has to position himself. Obviously, neither the square's content nor the chalk line constitute the work as such. Similar to Minimalist or Land art works of artists such as Robert Morris or Robert Smithson, the specific quality of the work cannot be described in terms of substance but must instead be defined in terms of a function relating to the artist's gesture, the place occupied by the work and the experience of the spectator who investigates the place. Another important aspect of the work is its ephemeral character. As soon as the snow melts, the white square changes to green and when the chalk is washed away by the melting ice or rain, the work disappears altogether.

But it would be wrong, to describe this process as one of dematerialization, as Lucy Lippard suggested in her writings on conceptual art.<sup>[3]</sup> Even though the physical aspect of the work is not a purpose in itself, it is a necessary component or departing point for an investigation



in the processual character of art not as an object but as an activity of setting, passing and interposing. The chalk line is interposed between nature and culture, its geometrical shape is set in a particular place or position in order to establish a relation between work and spectator. Finally, it vanishes as time passes.



*Notes on Location* (1969/1972)

The artist's first book, *Notes on Location*, written in 1969 and published in 1972, impressively demonstrates this transitional character in Downsbrough's work starting with a fixed form and specific location and then turning into a dynamic process of movements and shifts. A vector line indicates the displacement from place to location. The physical displacement on the page indicates the semantic displacement from a more general portion of space – a place – to a particular situation or place occupied – a location.

The words “here” and “there” are shifters of place insofar as they change their meaning according to the context in which they are uttered. Consequently, they don't refer to a thing or an object but to a relation between words in a sentence, between a word and the context in which it occurs, and, finally, between the words and the reader who uses them to locate her or his position in a particular spatial and temporal situation. Rather than representing the real

world, the shifters of *Notes on Location* refer to a thought process on the conditions of how things and persons are related and situated in the world on the basis of the principles of placement, replacement and displacement.

The same is true for Downsborough's photographs, at least since the early 1970s when he started to photograph his *Two Pipes* and *Two Poles* series. They are not – or not only – documenting the sculptural work. First and foremost, they are an integral component of the artist's research on the relationship between place, location and perception. Already the *Two Pipes* are not conceived of as individual objects, but rather as contextual markers. As Marie-Thérèse Champesme puts it, they offer “an open interval which changes in keeping with our viewpoint and which cannot be seen without at the same time observing what is there between and around it.”**[4]**

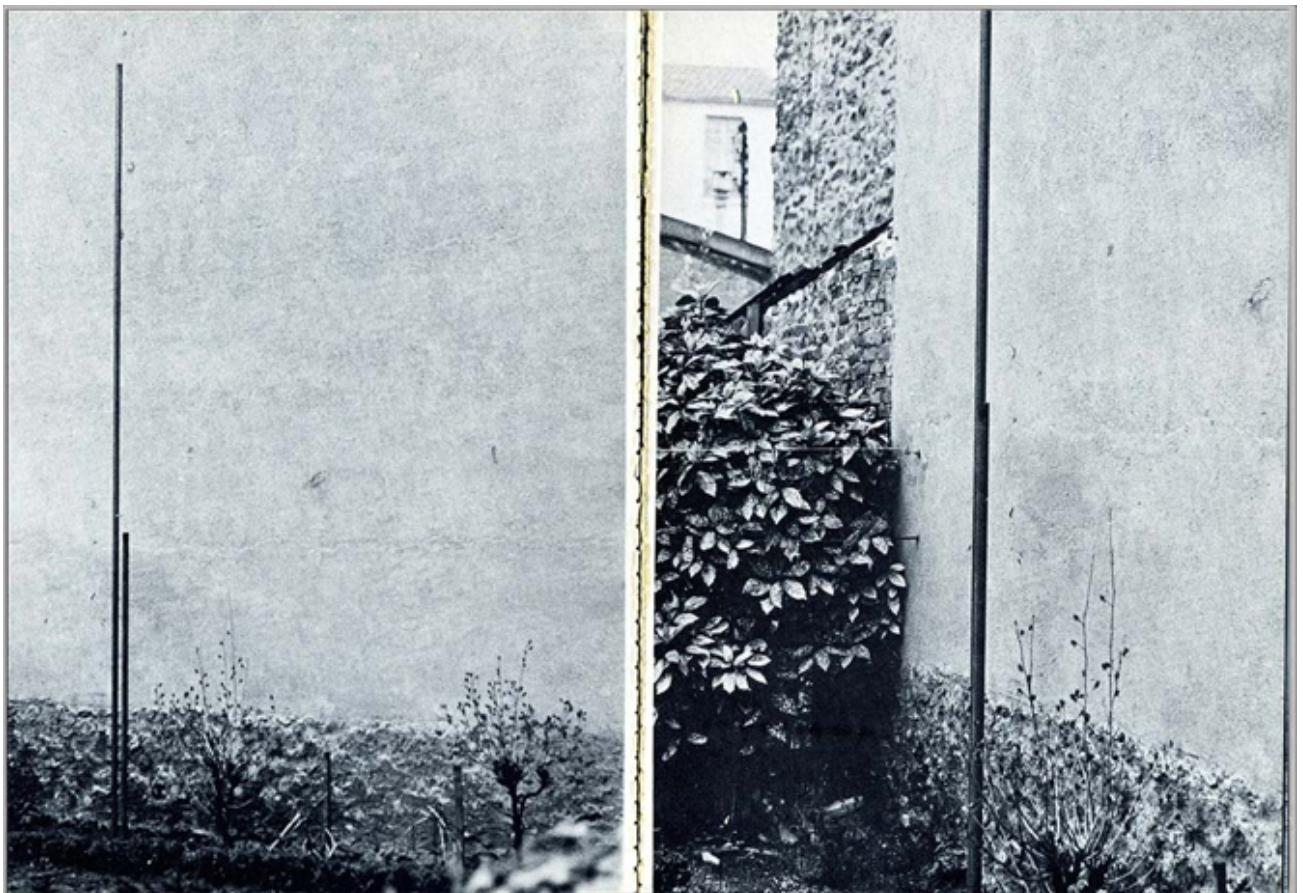


Contact sheet, *Eindhoven I-54* (1977)

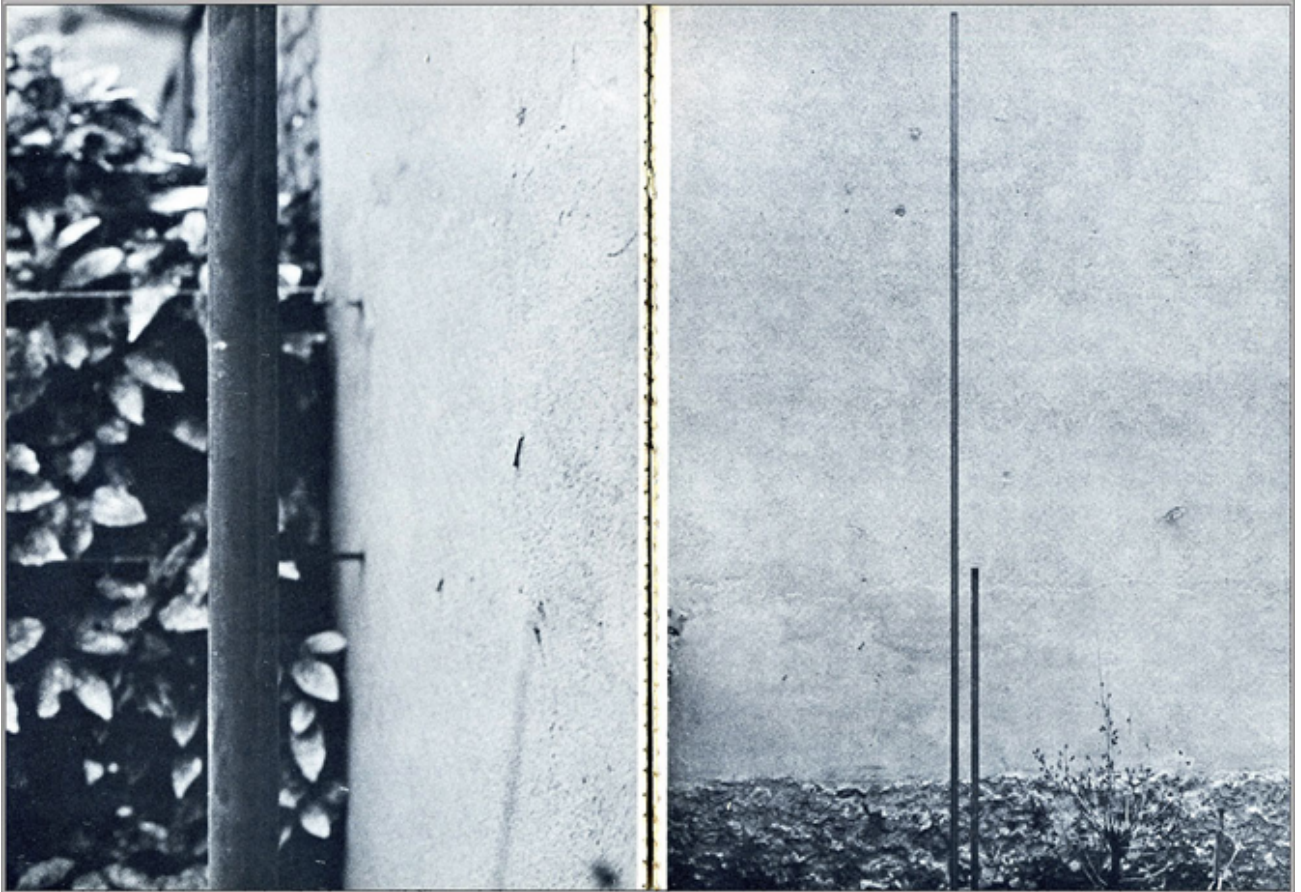
Subsequent to the installation of the *Two Pipes*, Downsbrough takes numerous photographs to explore the conditions under which his work may be encountered and its changing interrelationship with the situation according to different viewpoints and movements of the spectator. In this respect, time plays a fundamental role.

## Cinematographic Time and Movement

Time, movement and place are the decisive parameters in most of the photographic sequences depicting the *Two Pipes* and the *Two Poles*. Even if Downsborough denies any systematic approach, it is striking that some of the photographic contact sheets are suggestive of imitating exactly the most fundamental cinematographic camera movements. Published in 1974, *TWO PIPES FOURTEEN LOCATIONS*, his first book containing photographs, illustrates in an exemplary way the cinematographic exploration of the locations where the sculptures were installed. The first sequence, taken in 173 avenue de la Dhuis, Bagnolet, France, starts with a close-up showing the two pipes situated in front of a plastered courtyard wall and cutting the page vertically in two parts. On the following three pages, the camera performs a movement of ninety degrees concluding with a close-up of a lateral view of the pipes. The sequence ends with a frontal view corresponding to a long shot that shows the entire object and places it in relation to its surroundings.







*TWO PIPES FOURTEEN LOCATIONS (1974)*

The relationship of time and place, the latter understood in its active form of placement or displacement, is a central matter of Downsborough's urban photographs. From the very beginning, the artist conceived many of his pictures as diptychs, triptychs or larger sequences.

Already in 1976 he shot a whole roll of film from one viewpoint in order to explore movement and the passage of time.



Contact Sheet, *NYC 0004* (1978)

While this kind of continuous shooting is a well-known practice in photo-journalism in order to obtain the one perfect image, Downsborough's approach functions in other ways. On the one hand, there is always an interest in composition, in the arrangement of the depicted elements within the single image, on the other hand, the individual photographs are to be perceived as functional elements of the whole series. As such, they are "time-lapse

photographs” about the passing of time within physical space and, as Sarah McFadden notes, “imply time elapsing and measurable movement occurring within the space of time in which they were taken.”[5]

The artist himself insists on the dynamic character of his photographs: “There are also the photographs: the diptychs often reveal a displacement, whether it is the camera, a person or a vehicle that has moved.”[6] Actually, Downsborough’s first video, *AND ALIGN* (1976), seems to set in motion the early photo-sequences capturing the flux of cars and passers-by in the streets of New York. If the photographs, by their sequential arrangement, mimic movement and the passing of time, the film conveys an impression of immobility and calmness by the minimalism of both the narrative and the use of the camera. A fixed camera placed next to a traffic light shows a woman waiting at a street corner while cars and people are coming and going.



Stills from *AND ALIGN* (1976)

Being asked if the subjects he chooses for his films differ from those chosen for his photographs he replies: “No, for me photographs and film complement one another, both are means to explore how space is structured, to analyze how the city is built. Video is somehow the continuation of photography with, evidently, an extra element: time. But most often I am filming fixed elements. I look at static things and the way they are structured, with the moving eye of the camera.”[7]

Obviously, Downsbrough is not interested in movement or time as such but in the tension that inheres the confrontation of these elements with their complements or opposites. Time correlates always with space; movement is put in contrast with stillness.

Another way to work in the intersection of photography and film, the still and the moving image, is the flip-book. Originally, the flip-book was invented in the nineteenth century as an optical toy to create the illusion of movement by flipping the pages containing gradually varying images. Their hybrid, cinematographic character has been emphasized from the beginning. In 1868 John Barnes Linnett introduced the first patent of a flip-book as “Kineograph”, in 1886 Arthur Andrew Meville, in another patent, named it “living picture book”, and in 1895, finally, Maximilian Sklondonowsky used the name “Living Photographs” (Lebende Photographien) for his small bound booklets of pictures cut from his films.[8]

Peter Downsbrough's *WITHIN (TIME)*, written in 1987 and published in 1999, is a significant example of a flip-book that reflects its own hybrid character between photography and film while addressing questions of time, movement and displacement. As the artist remarks, time is here “represented by a line which starts from the midpoint of the vertical dimension of the book,” while rotation is “represented by a series of photographs of a person [...] [that] have been taken of a person while that person has been rotated full circle...”[9]



Contact sheet 0-0262 (1987). Photographs for *WITHIN (TIME)* (1999)

The passage through time is directly linked to the motion through the book. Yet the real subject of the book is the complex interrelationship between different modes of time. The thin line, functioning as a watch hand, represents clock time that passes inexorably and irreversibly. The fact that there are twenty-four lines, each associated with a different view of the represented woman, reminds us further of the fact that classical cinema is based on the



projection of twenty-four images per second. *WITHIN (TIME)* thus overtly demonstrates Robrecht Vanderbeeken's observation that "due to the quick succession of prints, flipbooks manage to illustrate the underlying principle of film."<sup>[10]</sup>

## On the Set

In the film *OCCUPIED*, conceived around 1990 and realized ten years later, in 2000, the camera scrutinizes the Cité Administrative in Brussels in long, slow exterior panning shots, changing suddenly to several consecutive shots of brief duration. In contrast to the flipbook, where still photographs are animated producing thus cinematographic movement, here the slide show effect of quickly alternating shots gives the film a photographic character.



*BRUSSELS 0300-30* (1991)

Ten years before the realization of *OCCUPIED*, in 1990, Downsbrough took a series of photographs at the same place that evidently prepare the aesthetic character of the film shots. Having seen these photographs before watching the film, one wonders if some of the shots

might be taken from photographs. Downsbrough confirms this interrelationship between the photographic and the filmic when he says about the site: “when I saw it I thought this is a film set.”<sup>[11]</sup> Actually, the photographs of the Cité Administrative had already been taken in respect of a future film, as a kind of storyboard for it. As such they are photographs of a film set; they are still films as much as some of the shots of the film are moving photographs.

From the very beginning of the film the photographic origin of the moving images is revealed by a fix, immobile image getting suddenly animated by a tracking shot alongside the architectural site. This sudden animation of a still photograph transforming into moving images can also be seen as a reference to the history of cinema. As we know, the Lumière Brothers’ first movie screenings began with a still image suddenly put in motion in order to provoke a surprise effect for the audience.

Downsbrough’s subtle use of sound contributes to this ambiguity leaving the spectator often in doubt about the photographic or filmic nature of the images. Immobile shots are thus confirmed in their stillness by the fact that the surrounding sound or the music is cut off, then the image starts to move and synchronically the sound starts while at other moments moving images are without sound and still images accompanied by music. Spoken by a woman, a man and a child the words of the voice-over refer to place (‘HERE’, ‘THERE’), time (‘TIME’) and the used medium (‘SET’, ‘FRAME’), all of them connected by conjunctions such as ‘AND’ and ‘AS’. These words stand for the passages between the shots, and in particular to the transitions from motion to stillness.

The sudden arrest of time and movement by still images corresponds quite well with Bellour’s concept of the inter-image (entre-image) that he defines as a passageway between photo, film and video.<sup>[12]</sup> A freeze frame, for instance, interrupts the narrative flow of a film and transforms a person or an action in a “universe of pure forms. To put it shortly, you are for a brief moment, which could last a whole life, confronted with an invented, disfigured image, which gets its force precisely of what it arises from – a drama. Of this drama it offers nothing more than a forgotten quintessence, an latent energy of lines and planes, of strokes and points, something like a pattern subtracted from the action but which constitutes its power.”<sup>[13]</sup>

What Bellour describes is nothing else than the shift from narrative time to spatial composition whereby the former remains latently present.

It is precisely this superposition of narration and composition, stillness and movement that situates *OCCUPIED* between photography and film, and finally, documentary and fiction. It is the very processes of passing (from one image to the other), interposing (still images within filmic flow; sound and words between images) and setting (of a cinematographic context – the film set) that create a rhythm that transforms the site into something else. Perhaps Bellour's "drama," but in any case a complex and fascinating work on fundamental principles of aesthetic and architectural construction.

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- [1] Wittgenstein, (§23).
- [2] Champesme, 2006: 71.
- [3] Lippard, 1997.
- [4] Champesme, 2003: 19.
- [5] McFadden, 2003: 29.
- [6] Champesme, 2006: 70.
- [7] Champesme, 2006: 63-64.
- [8] On the history of the flip-book see Fouché, 2005.
- [9] Küng, 2011: 173.
- [10] Vanderbeeken, 2009: 151.
- [11] Conversation with the author.
- [12] Bellour, 2002: 14.
- [13] Bellour, 2002: 12.

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