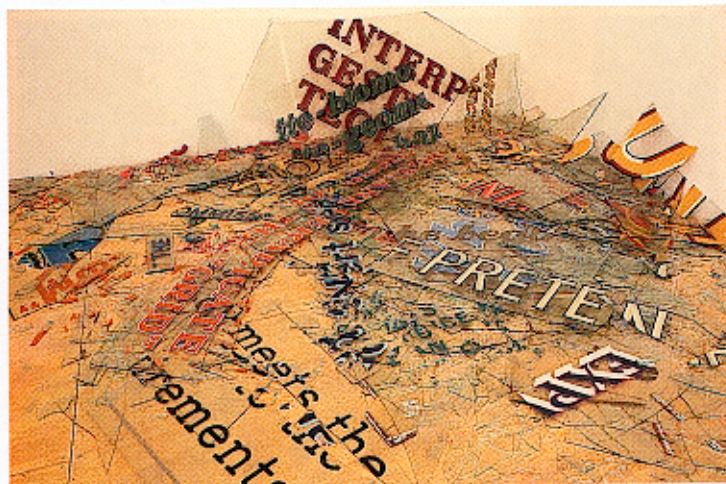


Art in America

SEPTEMBER 2001



Joe Amrhein: *In-site*, 2001, gold leaf, enamel on glass and Plexiglas, dimensions variable; at Roebling Hall.

Joe Amrhein at Roebling Hall

A former sign painter and current Williamsburg art dealer (he's the founder of Pierogi), the artist Joe Amrhein takes his cue from Robert Rauschenberg's notion that "writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing." Amrhein turns the language of art criticism—those descriptions of absence—into actual, figurative presences, complete with witty, abstract overtones. He culls the idiosyncratic phrasings ("oscillating ambiguity," say, or "sundry aggregation of disjunctive motifs") of professional and academic discourse from magazines like *Artforum* and *Art in America*. And in the versatile manner of a sign painter, he paints these brainy fragments of artspeak on sheets of translucent paper vellum and on glass sheets of varying sizes using a kaleidoscopic range of scales, colors, fonts and designs.

Amrhein exploits both the physical and metaphoric transparency of glass and vellum paper in sculptural installations and large wall-hung pieces. With *In-site* (all works 2001), he created a site-specific smashup, trashing and scattering perfectly lettered glass sheets in a corner of the gallery. The hermeneutical debris produced a spectacular tableau of jagged, truncated and broken phrases strewn across both real and intellectual space. *Rationalized* features glass sheets inscribed with phrases about abstract space and arranged on the wall like shelves. Under the gallery lights the work becomes a shadow play of criticality, as ghostly highbrow language plays across the wall.

Amrhein's large-scale vellum works (36 by 180 inches) are really thoughtful parodies of the classic abstract painting—eye-popping visually animated by a subtext of critical white noise—while his skillful sign-painting adds engaging allusions to the vibrant social and cultural implications of Pop art. *Post-Sputnik* is composed of layers of candy-colored, precisely rendered critical one-liners ("Mutant Cubist Construction Devoid of Post-Modern Doubts," "A Decidedly Glamorous Abstract Pictorial Formalism," etc.) painted on vellum strips collaged across the work. The type is small at the top, and, moving downward, each overlapping layer increases in point size. The work and the language grow physically larger, each colorful strata partially obscured by subsequent semitransparent layers of art-world pedantry.

Amrhein makes very real paintings and installations out of very abstract linguistic constructions. He parodies the language of criticism and the processes of abstraction, while holding both in bemused esteem. The works are serious, lively and a lot of fun, and they intimate far more than anyone can readily pin down.

—Calvin Reid