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## IN CONVERSATION

# Joe Amrhein with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

In the midst of renovations to the Boiler (located at 191 North 14th street, between Berry Street and Wythe Avenue, which will open on March 7th), Joe Amrhein took time off to visit the *Rail's* headquarters to talk with Publisher Phong Bui about his life and work. The artist's new exhibition, featuring a work entitled "Willing Suspension of Disbelief," will be shown at Volta Art Fair with Dogenhaus Gallery on March 5th.

**Phong Bui (Rail):** Where did you grow up and how did your life as an artist get started?

**Joe Amrhein:** I grew up in a working-class family in Sacramento. My dad was a mailman. He was a very hard worker; he had three jobs at times and worked day and night—he's who I got my work ethic from. And my mom raised their four children, a huge job. She is the one who gave me confidence in myself.

**Rail:** And you are the...?

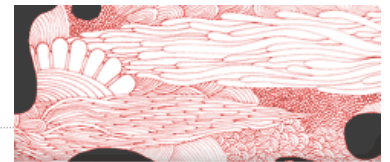
**Amrhein:** The fourth one, yeah, the last one. They broke the mold after me; they gave up. [Laughter.] Anyway, I always loved to draw as a kid. But then in high school, I got to know two interesting artists, Gary Pruner and Joe Patitucci, who gave me a lot of encouragement. And gradually I realized that art had become a passion for me, and that was what I really wanted to do for the rest of my life. I remember telling my parents about my desire to become an artist, but they weren't so thrilled with the idea. My dad kept saying to me that I had to get a state job, which would provide security, benefits and so on, and I just kept laughing it off—although that becomes more and more true every day, the older I get. [Laughter.] It's too late now, but I wouldn't trade it for anything else I've done.

**Rail:** Did you go to any art school?

**Amrhein:** I didn't go to any art school. However, I did go to American River College, a junior college, and took a few art classes there and at other colleges in Sacramento. And when I moved to San Francisco, I attended all the free lectures at the Institutes, which was basically my only art history or critical theory education. Meanwhile, I never really understood how to make a living and go to art school at the same time. I



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



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never knew how to get grants and things like that so I relied on the do-it-yourself method. It just seemed that most people were talking a lot about other issues and going to parties—which is great, but I felt it would make more sense to get a studio. I started to work on my own, so I did that and I had my sign painting business on the side to support myself.

**Rail:** How did you get your business started? Were you ever trained as a sign painter?

**Amrhein:** Well, there's not really a school to go to. I started and learned how to do it on my own with my older brother in high school. It was a very slow, awkward process because of all of the technical requirements; from tracing different fonts, cutting letters for Plexiglas signs, silk-screening, to learning what brushes to use, and so forth. But we got better over time and we were able to make some money. So a few years later, after my two older brothers came out of the Navy, my brother Tom and I decided to start a sign business. We bought a small company that was selling their business for \$5,000. It was just learning on the job, as we went. We were able to develop it and push it in our own direction for a while. But when computers started taking over and undercutting prices on the trade, doing it by hand become impossible. These days it's expensive to do it by hand, and no one can do it by hand any more, so it's sort of a lost trade. At the same time, I was curating these shows in Sacramento. For instance, I did a bus bench show, which was really great. You know, all the bus benches were always empty because Sacramento, being the state capital, did not allow any advertising around the capitol building. Somehow I got the city to let me put together a show on these bus benches. And for three years I organized these shows where artists would paint and do all sorts of performances on site. We would organize tours on the bus to see the benches at different bus stops around the capitol. Sacramento's art scene was small, but there were many great artists who were living and teaching nearby at U.C. Davis, like William T. Wiley, Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri. Bruce Nauman had just moved to San Francisco, which wasn't far from Sacramento. Of course the whole scene of the Bay Area Painters, including (Richard) Diebenkorn, David Park, and others were also around at that time. I was trying to take in as much as I could.

**Rail:** So you got your Sacramento/Davis connection while trying to develop your own identity as an artist. Then you moved to LA, where you spent eight years. What sort of work were you making at the time?

**Amrhein:** Well, I was doing much more figurative-based work with canvases that had sculptural elements to them. They were constructed with associative forms and figures that were layered on different panels. In a sense I was trying to break out of the rectangle, in a Kelleyesque way, but using a painterly language with a kind of heavy California flair to it. I was also doing ceramic sculpture at the same time. But the urge to come to New York became very strong. So, after having sold some work and saving a bit of money from my sign-painting, I came to New York and found a place in Williamsburg. The money ran out pretty quickly though. [*Laughs.*] In any case, I met an artist friend, Dan Reynolds, who knew I was a sign painter and he needed some help installing Lothar Baumgarten's works at Marian Goodman gallery. The irony of this whole thing is that when I came to New York to be an artist, it was my sign trade that got me involved in the high-end art world. I was meeting all these important conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner and amazing dealers like Leo Castelli and Marian Goodman. In the meantime, my own artwork was languishing quietly in the studio. [*Laughs.*] And then there was this

dealer who always prodded me to incorporate sign painting into my work.

**Rail:** Who would that be?

**Amrhein:** Jack Tilton. Back then I couldn't connect conceptual art and text art with what I was doing before. I just couldn't see the two together. I mean there were other artists like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, whose works were so developed and connected with art history, so I couldn't see how I could fit in.

Finally, Bruce Pearson was curating a big group show called "Just What Do You Think You're Doing Dave" at the Williamsburg Art & Historical Center in the mid-'90s. I decided to do a text piece, to kind of prove Jack Tilton wrong. It was entitled, "What's it to you, Jack," with "Hit the road, Jack," "You don't know Jack," all these phrases that I painted on a big billboard-like sign. I thought, the art world is so esoteric that even an audience of one would be fine. [Laughs.] After making this piece for Bruce's show, I realized that it was the first time I really incorporated my sign painting into art making. So Jack was right for having proved me wrong. From that day on I really started developing my own text work. And so my time in Williamsburg has been really developing this concept, until today.



"Willing Suspension of Disbelief" (2009), Enamel and gold leaf on mylar, 98 × 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** I remember reading Roberta Smith's insightful *New York Times* review of your show at Roebing Hall, in 2001. She said, "These works pay homage while exacting an exuberant revenge!"

**Amrhein:** The revenge against the critic? Well, the other response I got was that my artwork was bombproof—in a critic's context—because I was using critical language as part of the content. At that time I was primarily utilizing this hyperbole of exaggerated language that describes artwork, which I extracted from various critical languages used in different art magazines such as *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, *Art in America*, etc, etc. Even though when you take them out of their contexts, often those phrases seem so ridiculous, they can also be very poetic. And I know, trying to describe concepts and visual ideas through language is very difficult and it's hard to really do it well. It's always this linear situation where the critic has the last word. So I thought, by pulling those words out of their context, I can recreate them in a different form, which is both written and visual at the same time.

**Rail:** And by layering them from shorter to longer phrases, you were able to obscure the meaning even more—not to say there was any specific meaning to begin with—but the material, being mylar, allows you to....

**Amrhein:** Well, I was working on other surfaces for a while, but the reason I like mylar is because it has the tough yet smooth surface that takes the paint well at the same time. And it's transparent. Therefore when you overlay the sheets there's a sense of memory which evokes this distance and density. Yet the layering can be confusing and difficult to read. It plays with this whole idea of language being impossible to understand anyway. So I could only understand it visually. I'm doing a piece entitled "Willing Suspension of Disbelief," which is based on

translations from twenty-six different languages that no one can understand unless he or she knows each of the languages. And by using the sign fonts it is a way for me to visualize that concept, because any concept you have you always have to make it concrete, unless it's a performance or a sound piece, or a purely conceptual piece. This is one thing that makes painting so pleasurable, because I love taking the time, whatever time I have, to paint each letter by hand. It's just great that I finally was able to connect my traditional sign painting with what I want to express as an artist.

**Rail:** One of the complexities that springs from Duchamp's readymade is that it creates even more complex practices that question how and in what way the hand is utilized in the case of Jasper Johns, on one hand, and Warhol on the other. However, from there came forth photographic and textual-based works, which of course gave rise to the first generation of conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and a few other

**Amrhein:** I admire them all because they made it possible for me to do what I do.

**Rail:** But unlike many of them who prefer the mechanical process to make their work, you insist on the visibility of the hand, which often reveals the pencil marks, traces of process left unerased so that the viewer sees how the whole work is made.

**Amrhein:** Lawrence and Lothar did have works hand-painted on the wall, with very specific types of font. But now everyone is mostly using vinyl because it's more practical these days. For my purpose, I like doing it all with my hand. The other difference is while Lawrence writes his own pieces, which he regards as sculptures and drawings, I like to feed on the language that is already out in the world, to be read, to be consumed. It's my own idiosyncratic way of appropriation. What I am doing now with translations of different languages, it's about breaking it down even more. How it can be understood in one language, and it is hard to describe in another.

**Rail:** That's what happened with the Tower of Babel. How about your painting on glass shelves and broken glass on the floor?

**Amrhein:** The glass pieces, which I began in the late 90s, are more about the idea of language being very ephemeral. Even though you can see the shadows cast on the wall, when the light goes away, language goes away. And the broken and scattered pieces have to do with the fragility of glass and the breaking down of language, and then suddenly it becomes an artifact, ultimately revealing its own fragility, and yet there is this feeling of fracture and dangerous elements as well.

**Rail:** Is there any connection to Process Art in the 70s, especially Robert Smithson, who I know you admire? I remember that terrific show that you co-curated with Brian Conley, which was a re-creation of Smithson's "Dead Tree" installation. Joe Mashek wrote one of the catalog texts.



Photograph of the artist installation. "Re-Site" (2002) at Post Gallery, Los Angeles.



**Amrhein:** Yeah. Smithson was a big influence on me. One of his glass pieces, “Atlantis,” for instance, an outdoor installation of broken glass that intersects the landscapes of Atlantis. Also, anytime you break glass and you throw glass on the floor it becomes performative, because of the movement of the body or gesture it requires.

**Rail:** So do you see your work as sculpture, painting, or installation/performing art, or perhaps all of those things combined?

**Amrhein:** Well, even though my work is involved with some aspects of installation and performance as a way to amplify what I want to do visually, I always consider myself a painter because it comes out of that whole process of painting.

**Rail:** Let’s shift the subject to your other equally involved role as the force behind Pierogi. First, what compelled you to create the gallery? Second, how do you manage to mediate between being an artist and a gallerist simultaneously?

**Amrhein:** Well after leaving LA, coming to NY, in the midst of the recession of the late 80s, which lasted until the early 90s, the art world was suffering because nothing was selling, which is similar to what is going on now, but a lot of great art was being made. I found myself basically working in my studio, going to openings and after parties while trying to send out my slides to different galleries. That was the extent of my art career, and I found it very frustrating. So I wanted to be a bit more proactive and open up my studio as a place to show works by other artists I knew at the time. It was a way to stir up some dialogue among us in Williamsburg. Everybody including Fred [Tomaselli], Amy [Sillman], Bruce [Pearson], and many others were around. Mike [Ballou] and Adam [Simon] were doing Four Walls, Annie Heron was doing the same with Test Site, and so on. I felt like I wanted to create something like a glorified studio, where I would get friends and artists to hang their work on the wall and just invite people over to see what they were doing.

**Rail:** And the original location was?

**Amrhein:** 167 North 9th Street, which was right next door to the present Pierogi. It opened in 1994. I really had no intention of doing this, and I sort of fought it for a while, but as soon as you put up some clean walls and put up some works, everyone was excited about Pierogi being a new gallery. It was hard the first several years, because the gallery was also my studio, so there was a lot of moving back and forth every weekend in order to prepare for a new show.

**Rail:** Who was the first artist you showed?

**Amrhein:** Mike [Ballou] was



Interior shot of Pierogi's Boiler.

the first. Then, I think, David [Scher], Bruce [Pearson], James [Siena] and we had a lot of group shows in between. Soon after that, I started the Flat Files.

**Rail:** Yeah. Do tell us a bit of how it came to being.

**Amrhein:** Initially, the idea was to show works on paper, and make it accessible and friendly to everyone who doesn't want to spend a lot of money but would like to collect and get involved with the art world. But it also serves as a resource center for curators who come and look through such an eclectic group of works for their curatorial purposes. I must admit that after a few years, running the space became more and more demanding; I knew that I needed some help.

**Rail:** That's when Susan [Swenson] came into the picture?

**Amrhein:** Yeah. The first year I ran the gallery she came by the space with some friends to see a show but it was so crowded she never came in. Later, some friends of mine invited us over for a dinner party and that's when I actually met her.

**Rail:** What year?

**Amrhein:** In 1995. She actually didn't want anything to do with me at that dinner party, I can tell you that. But I kept calling her, and after a while we started seeing each other. [Laughter]

**Rail:** It had to begin somewhere! Meanwhile, you were still working as a sign painter?

**Amrhein:** Yeah. Because even though we began to sell some works, it was never enough to pay the rent.

**Rail:** Your situation reminds me of Robert Graves, the British writer known for his historical novels such as *I Claudius*, which brought him money, but he preferred to write poetry. So in reference to the two activities, he said, "I breed my dogs to sell them in order to feed my cats." Would that be the same in your case?

**Amrhein:** I don't know that one feeds the other. It's all one activity for me, it's a way of life. I have always been an artist, it's an activity I get a lot of satisfaction out of, and I enjoy trying to develop ideas and produce work. And developing the gallery is that same involvement; it's an art project in and of itself. I like the solitary aspect of being in a studio making work, but I also love the dialogue with and among other artists and people. The truth is, without Susan, my wife, it could never happen. We work so well together. She puts so much effort into it. It's amazing.

**Rail:** Could you tell us how Pierogi Press began?

**Amrhein:** When we first went to England with the Flat Files, we were traveling from London to Manchester. And while we were on the train, we talked about how Susan could get more involved with the writers and poets in the community. Susan wanted to develop a monthly journal, which turned out to be every six months, partly because it takes so much work on top of what we're already doing. It's also a way to bring artists and writers together. It's again an energy/synergy sort of idea.

With the advent of computer technology, some of the artists I work with

are very involved in multidisciplinary activity and it really adds so many possibilities. Painting and other traditional mediums are great, but there is so much history that it's difficult to overcome something that has been discovered. Not to say paintings can't be developed into new form, but given that ideas can develop into other forms of practice, any form that fulfills the artist's growth is viable.

**Rail:** One of the things that most people associate with Pierogi is that its artists, whether representational or abstract, seem to share a common language that relates to an obsessive, overdriven repetitive markmaking. And the reason I am asking you this question is partly because you are more of a conceptual/ text-based artist, and yet in your sensitivity as a gallerist you must have felt a prevailing pulse towards this tendency. Could you tell us more about that?

**Amrhein:** People always think of Pierogi as having an obsessive kind of style with a conceptual base, like Mark Lombardi or Daniel Zeller, which is true in that there is a vernacular that has developed over time that Pierogi cultivates. I do love the dedication of this kind of work and the way the artists talk about it, and I don't think it was a reaction against Neo-Expressionist painting or other kinds of work. It just happened at the time when I was developing the files. I saw a lot of works on paper that had this intense handwork. Not to say that Williamsburg has a style, but there were a lot of artists living in Williamsburg that were sharing this visual energy. I also think of that with the emergence of the whole computer generation, dealing with the small compact screen, digitalized imagery, and other things. Perhaps it's their way to rebel against the whole notion of artists in their studio throwing paint at their canvasses and so on. It's hard to put all of that into any specific category. But we have also shown a lot of works of different natures. Chris Martin, Brian Conley, Kim Jones, Kate Gilmore, Ward Shelley are very different artists. Now with the new addition of the Boiler, we can show more monumental works by Jonathan Schipper, Tavares Strachan, Ward Shelley, and Yoon Lee.

**Rail:** What about your adventure in Leipzig, which started in 2006?

**Amrhein:** Well, it was a period where things were moving very fast. A lot of galleries were moving to Chelsea from Williamsburg. We didn't want to go anywhere because our identity was here in Williamsburg; we loved it here, so we weren't going anywhere. Going to Chelsea seemed an antithesis somehow. I knew that if I went to Chelsea I could sell a lot more work, but if I were just selling artwork, I would quit. It just wasn't something I wanted to do. But when I went to Leipzig to have a show of my own work I felt that there was a community of artists at the Baumwollspinnerei, which is like a MASS MoCA-type complex. It's an abandoned area and a lot of artists are moving into it, some galleries opened up, and I just love the energy there. It really felt like the early Brooklyn, Williamsburg scene. Anyway some people there invited me to be part of it, and it's been great, but we decided last year to downsize it because all of the travel, etc. got to be too much and then the timing coincided with the recent economic meltdown. There will be a smaller space, where we can show some smaller works along with the Flat Files. In the meantime, we want to focus more on the Boiler.

**Rail:** It seems a Herculean effort at the worst possible time. Why now?

**Amrhein:** Being an artist, it's always a Herculean effort in a sense. You have to have a job to support yourself while doing your own work in the

studio, no matter whether there's a good economy or not. It's always an effort. But, months back when we were thinking of putting our effort back into Brooklyn, it was last summer, and we decided to look around Williamsburg for different spaces and think about doing other projects here, primarily because we had artists like, as mentioned, Tavares Strachan, Jonathan Schipper, Dawn Clements, Yoon Lee, and Ward Shelley, who do big and amazing works that require more space. As a dealer you have to give your artists the opportunity to show their work. Their ambitions have to be shown. So, Susan and I looked around for a while and we finally found this magical space with high ceilings, which had been a boiler room. It seemed at first a counterintuitive idea but it's something we really want to do and we're just going for it and I think it's really going to pay off because we have plenty of time to work hard, and have the greatest pleasure to show good work. Fortunately, Stephanie Eisenberg and her sister Barbara are so involved in the politics of the neighborhood, especially what goes on about affordable housing and the issue of gentrification (Stephanie is a strong advocate against the development of the Domino Factory on the waterfront, which is an 11 acre site, into 23 hundred units of living space). She's been fighting to develop it into something more cultural rather than commercial. We're really grateful to Stephanie and Barbara. We give them all the credit for giving us the chance to do this. It's really great.

**Rail:** Is there any validity in being an idealist?

**Amrhein:** Well, again it's a way of life. I believe so much in art and the power of art and what allows a vision or an inspiration intrinsically and extrinsically to come to fruition. So there's nothing else I can do except participate, and when I participate I do it to an extreme. *[Laughter.]*

**Rail:** Well the work ethic you got from your dad. But who cares about being practical. It's overrated. *[Laughter.]* What else would you like to do with the Boiler?

**Amrhein:** We hope that, in between shows, we can have panel discussions, poetry readings, film screenings, and performances. It's our wish to regenerate a new kind of energy in the art community. But we also want to be open to some international contexts where other curators, including Hans Ulrich [Obrist] and others, may consider curating a show here and there. That way it'd bring some interesting energy to Williamsburg. The possibilities are limitless.

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