



Joe Amrhein, *Artifact (Quote)*, 2002, installation view

Artifact (Quote)

Joe Amrhein at Post

by Jody Zellen

In *Artifact (Quote)* Joe Amrhein has created two installations: one about order, the other about chaos. *Retro* consists of horizontal bands of vellum each with a hand painted word or sentence that spans the width of the gallery. The strips of vellum flow across the gallery's ceiling and down the wall increasing in size as they move from high to low. In *Re-Site* large fragments of glass have been scattered around the gallery floor. The phrases on the glass are broken apart never again to coalesce. Amrhein makes reading difficult, if not impossible. Yet his work is all about language. The language he uses is specific. He lifts words, phrases, and often complete sentences from art magazines like *Artforum*, *Art in America*, or *Flash Art*. The articles in these publications theorize about art and the

vocabulary their writers use is specific. Amrhein acknowledges that this language can never replace the art it describes, yet uses it to make new works. He sifts through these disparate texts looking for something specific. What he chooses is both descriptive and obtuse. Never taking more than a few discreet phrases or words, Amrhein weaves these fragments together, presenting them as something to be read as well as to be looked at.

An accomplished sign painter, Amrhein skillfully paints each letter by hand. He uses a colorful palette, creating outlines as well as drop shadows in italic and Roman letters. In *Retro* the top sentence reads: "Oscillating between being deadpan, slightly cryptic and unexpectedly romantic." It continues: "disparate verbal images, inducing a kind of sensual delirium." From the words of others, Amrhein has created visual poetry. Although it is impossible to read all of Amrhein's panels—the overlaps become greater as the panels

become larger—one can make out enough of the text. To make the work fit the space, Amrhein had to carefully plan its structure. Longer sentences give way to short phrases. The ending is a list of single words. Aware of presenting contradictory thoughts, Amrhein sees the works as abstractions. Each notion, word or phrase opens up an avenue to explore. Why Duchampian? Audacious? Whimsy or Retro?

While *Retro* is ordered and linear, *Re-Site* is chaotic and circular. Bits and pieces of words on broken glass can be read—a fragment here or there. One makes out: Void, Interrupt, Gesture. The work is sharp and dangerous. Beautifully painted language has become a pile of debris. The room is inviting and one wants to explore, look through the pile of shards for choice phrases or preserved words, but entry is forbidden, even dangerous. One can travel into the space of *Retro* but can only look down on the crumbled panes of glass in *Re-Site*.

What Amrhein is saying about art, language, and criticism hovers between the two works. On the one hand the language of criticism is unreadable. It's a barrier to be shattered and scattered, where only a few choice words are worth saving. Simultaneously, while criticism is abstract it's also poetic, and when Amrhein enlarges and collages words, they become a new visual language. Amrhein succeeds in making poetry concrete by taking cues from Robert Smithson, who remarked, "one must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing."