

JEN WEIH: THE WILLIAM H. REYNOLDS ROTUNDA

holly ward

Entering Jen Weih's **William H Reynolds Rotunda**, we realize we are not in a rotunda at all. The rotunda has been turned into a rectangular, semi-corporate, semi-modernist site through the addition of a set of eight monochromatic panels and/or minimalist paintings affixed directly to the gallery's back wall. This formal austerity is interrupted by the chaotic elements of a soundtrack of a stroll through an amusement park and a rather threatening net of black balloons hanging overhead. Circumnavigation through this space becomes a clash of ideals and aesthetics as we experience the gap between the carnival-esque and the corporate.

William H Reynolds was a real estate developer and speculator whose career stretched from the 19th century well into the 20th. In retrospect, his work is highlighted by the creation of Dreamland, the famous amusement park on New York's Coney Island, and his peripheral role in the development of the Chrysler Building in mid-town Manhattan.¹

The following is an interview between Holly Ward and Jen Weih, June 2005.

Holly: What was the starting point for this work?

Jen: I wanted to do a piece that looked at aesthetics that mitigate or conceal risk, and aesthetics that glamorize risk. That became the midway versus the office building. I was interested in places of gambling or speculation for recreation versus the "legitimate business" scenario, and the way business represents itself in a public way.

H: In what way do you see these aesthetics as speaking to each other, and how were you attempting to deal with this in the context of a gallery installation?

J: I conceived of this piece when the Or was going to be in an office, and I wanted to do something that investigated risk by conflating the office with the midway. Through changes at the Or and their decision to remain in the gallery space, this is where we ended up.

H: The gallery site itself speaks to a certain pre-determined set of behaviors or ideologies, and I imagine that the transition from the literal office space to the inference of an office inside the gallery was adaptable to addressing these concerns. Is behavior inside a determined space an issue?

J: I have a continuing interest in the carnivalesque and the very literal site of the carnivalesque, the fair. I find it fascinating, this place where people get this sanctioned expression of, well, it's not really leisure; it's sort of entertainment, sort of action, because it's not relaxing. In fact it's exhausting and really expensive. It's the evolution of the fair over five hundred years.

The commodification of that is really interesting to me. One of the things that I have been affected or impressed by, living in New York, is the difference between being in an explicitly market-oriented art community versus an artist-run centre environment. As I was working out how

I was going to express the more officious element, I chose painting because I wanted to address the gallery as a site of economic speculation, particularly in terms of people buying paintings and the economy of art, painting being the quintessential form.

H: Yes, these paintings speak directly to their status as architectural adornment, and are a kind of value-added element, almost like decoration. As such you have removed them from their status as painting. Now they exist in the more nebulous form of installation.

J: Yes, but of course there is nothing that escapes the buying and the selling. Even if your piece isn't bought and sold, something will get bought and sold. That's just the way it is.

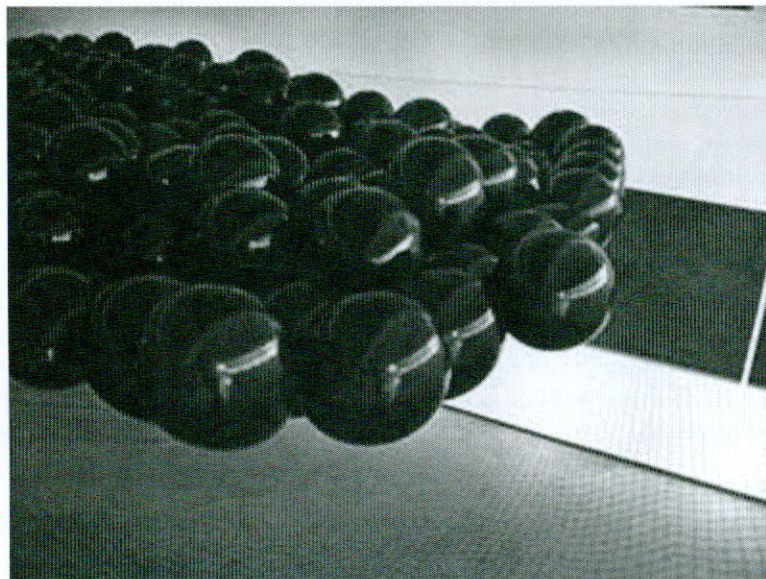
H: About the balloons...I associate balloon drops with the roaring 20s and ballroom games, but the ominous tone here is making me think of the scene in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* where we realize that Jack is crazy. He goes

into the ballroom of the hotel that he's watching over and has this hallucination. It's the 20s and there's a party going on, and he's the host and a very important man.

To me these balloons are like an ominous reference to the frenzy and dementia that people like Reynolds participated in, all these guys who were trying to build the tallest skyscraper in the race for the top, or the biggest and best amusement park in the world. They were competing to create the ultimate symbols of American freedom, progress and prosperity, to show off to the rest of the world. And although we can look at that and criticize it for being obnoxious or absurd,

these "accomplishments" were and are a point of national pride. So whether Dreamland was a perfect moneymaking formula for Reynolds or not, it fulfilled a purpose.

Tell me, how is Reynolds emblematic for you?



J: He is interesting to me because he was very entrepreneurial, very successful, and then things fucked up...he didn't build the Chrysler building, Chrysler built the Chrysler building.

One of the things I was thinking about was the fact the balloons are going to shrink. That kind of collapse is really important. As a character he embodies both accomplishment and failure.

1. Jen Weih, William H Reynolds Rotunda Artist Statement, Or Gallery, 2005.

Holly Ward is a Vancouver-based artist currently completing her MFA at the University of Guelph. She is currently exhibiting in *News from Nowhere*, a group exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto. Her work has been shown across Canada, in London, the UK and Mexico City.

ANDREW DADSON: THE NEON BANK PROJECT

anne elizabeth low

The **Neon Bank** project is an endeavor that begins with the simple act of agreeing to have one's bank card spray-painted neon, and extends into a myriad of social and bureaucratic interactions. The precursor to **Neon Bank** was a similar project that also took place on the surface of one's bank card, Andrew Dadson's for that matter, and consisted of a bank card painted white with the words "fucking bank" across the front in Letraset. For **Neon Bank**, while more abstracted, the same notion remains. One becomes a member of a worldwide club of sorts, carrying around a small rectangle of neon plastic with its use value apparently wiped out and aesthetically hidden.

I became a member of the **Neon Bank** in 2001, and what follows is an abridged personal history of being a card-carrying member.

Aside from my initial fears about having my card painted (after seeing more than one of Andrew's bank cards disappear into bank machines due to an overly thick layer of pink spray paint), I still agreed to hand over my card to be painted. After three years of use, with no problems other than a distressing amount of dirt that clearly appeared on the surface of my pink card, I had a stand off with a bank employee about the state of my card. I had gone to my bank to do a transaction that had to be done face-to-face with an employee. She asked for my card, which I happily handed to her. She examined the card and then asked, "What have you done to your card?" I replied, "My friend paints them pink, it's an art project." She then began to tell me that such a thing was not allowed, yet didn't seem to be sure why, and said that she had to fetch her manager before any transaction could occur. Taking my card with her, she left me for about 15 minutes, and then returned with her manager, who told me that my bank card was property of the bank, and I had thus defaced bank property. I then told her I had figured that since I had paid the bank to keep my money since I was about 15 years old, that by now I had probably paid for the price of the card and thus it belonged to me, much like a lease. She didn't agree, but didn't seem to be up to the fuss I was stirring about them confiscating my card. I managed to leave the bank having made the transaction I needed with the pink card in tow. I considered it to be the first victory for the **Neon Bank**.

Just before my membership with the **Neon Bank** ended due to a trans-continental change of address, I was a victim of fraud. All of the cautionary tales about using sketchy cash machines in even sketchier variety stores became true, as someone stole \$900 out of my bank account by making a copy of my card, and videoing me punch in my pin number. This incident was seemingly unconnected to the **Neon Bank**, that is, until I had yet another stand off over the aesthetic state of my card, this time with my mother. The stolen money had been taken out of our joint bank account, and thus my mom had taken the whole episode into



her hands, as we now had to approach the bank to report the fraud.

I first contacted the bank over the phone, and from there was made to feel as though I had stolen my own money, and now had to start the process of proving that I was not the perpetrator. As such, this involved yet another face to face transaction with a bank employee. My mother was aware of the pink state of my card and thus another stand off ensued. On the morning of the visit to the bank which we had to attend together, my mom became quite serious over breakfast and said: "Look, Anne, I know that your card is pink because Andrew painted it, and that it is an art project and that it is all about taking ownership and 'screwing the bank,' but the thing is that the bank will not understand that and if you go into the bank with that flipping pink card they are going to give us a hard time, and well I just don't think that it is worth going through to have the pink card." Not only taken aback by my mother's take on what the **Neon Bank** was, but also her extrapolation of not being presumed innocent based on the color of my bank card, was all very telling about the project in general.

I am currently on hiatus from being a member of the **Neon Bank**, but the above reflections provide examples of the intense confusion caused by the simple act of making a little pocket monochrome out of a forced loan of economic property, your bank card.

Anne Elizabeth Low is an artist who currently resides in London, England.