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## The Magic Hour

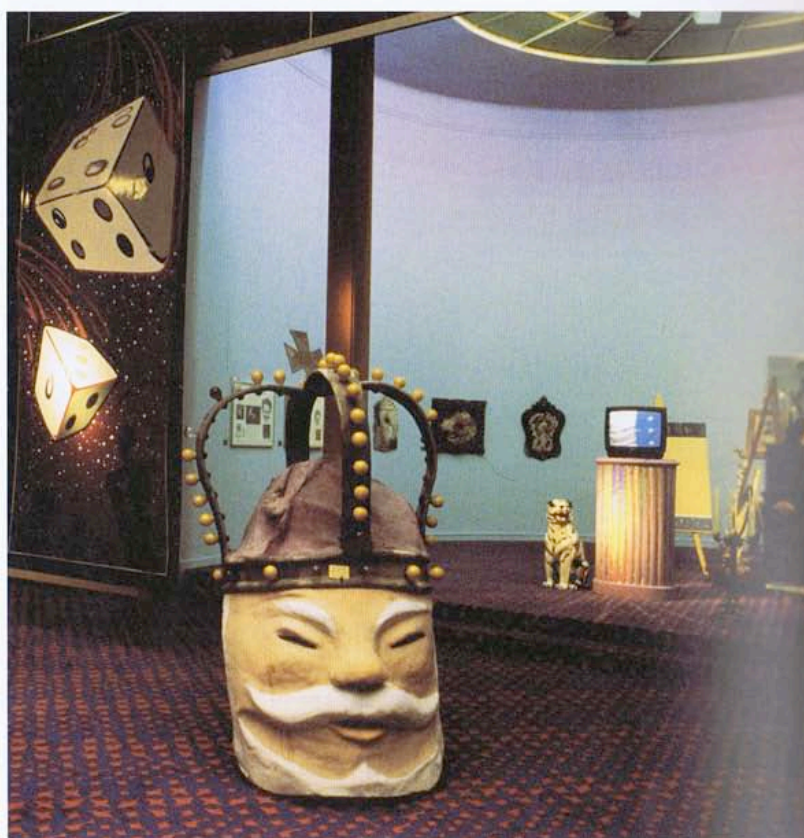
Neue Galerie, Graz

Graz is a city redolent of old Europe and the Austro-Hungarian empire, but the palm trees that framed the doors of the Künstlerhaus, which was hosting this exhibition from the Neue Galerie, suggested an altogether different world.

The show's title – 'The Magic Hour: The Convergence of Art and Las Vegas' – alluded to the magical dreamscape created when the sun goes down and the neon lights of Las Vegas are switched on, transforming the city into a visual wonderland. For curator Alex Farquharson this moment has a unique artistic significance: 'If ever one needed an allegory for the triumph of art, or artifice, over nature, the Strip on its way to the magic hour would be it.'

The exhibition space itself was modelled on a casino. The walls (*Untitled*, 2001), dreamt up by the Vegas-based artist Yek, were painted in a colour scheme that ranged from yellow to burgundy, and the funky carpet, with its pattern of purple and red stars and circles, was designed by Jim Isermann (*Untitled*, 2001). It was like walking across a pinball machine. A huge poster by E. Chen (for E Design) advertised a plan for the *Titanica Las Vegas* (2001) gaming and hotel complex, an exact replica of the Titanic – entertainment will apparently include a nightly simulation of the liner's sinking. Opposite was a large king's head, its crown studded with dead light bulbs: a fragment of a disused neon advertisement imported from the 'Neon Museum's Boneyard' in Las Vegas. Elsewhere, the Reverend Ethan Acres' lecture/performance *The Right or the Crooked Way* (1997) was projected onto a screen set in an inflatable model church (*True Love Chapel*, 2001). In it, the Reverend rants about how Vegas made him a believer, and his voice echoes throughout the space with the manic tension of religious ecstasy. The far end of the gallery was taken up with Liberace memorabilia compiled by Jeffrey Valance, a bizarre collection of pictures and devotional objects varying from the mildly demented to the wildly baroque.

The sensation of being absorbed into a world of visual excess was fascinating, but works such as these ran the risk of being outdone by the 'real thing'. Other artists avoided this pitfall by addressing the visual culture of Las Vegas on a more abstract level. David



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The Magic Hour  
Installation view

Batchelor's *Electric Colour Tower 6* (2001), an assortment of multi-coloured neon light boxes stacked in a six metre high shelf unit, worked like an index to the grammar of light effects. Yek's concave paintings in unbelievable candy colours pushed the idea of the monochrome over the top into a visual frenzy aptly described by their titles, such as *Very Silly Rapture* (1999) or *Still Bananas* (2000). In her translucent watercolour paintings *Mirage* and *Union Plaza* (2001) Silke Otto-Knapp described the moment when the city dissolves into a sea of lights, colours and shapes. Here Vegas became a paradigm for the suspension of reality in pure visuality. Julie Ault and Martin Beck meanwhile explored the conversion of cities into simulacra in *Outdoor Systems*, *Indoor Distributions* (2000). On a small platform they presented works in a variety of media, including a video of the making of the Luxor casino in Vegas and documentation of the conversion of unprofitable

high streets in American towns into historical theme parks.

Panels supplied information about Archizoom's 1970 project *No-Stop City*, a vision of a fluid metropolis that changes according to the forces of consumption. The reality of the Strip, the ideology of profit-oriented urban planning and the utopia of radical decadence, were exposed as three

perspectives on the same subject: the dislocations affected by excessive forms of capitalism. It could be said that 'The Magic Hour' as a whole sided with the spirit of Archizoom. It portrayed Vegas as a site where degenerate, footloose capitalism brings about its own eclipse, dispersing into a utopian world of visual exuberance.

Jan Verwoert



Bridget Smith  
*Excalibur (Down)*  
1999  
C-print mounted  
on aluminium  
119 x 162 cm