

ART REVIEW

Luna Luna: A Fantasy That Comes With a Price Tag

A blockbuster restaging of an “art amusement park” from 1987 aims to recover a lost element in art — fun. But in our age of hype and commerce, was it doomed to fall short?

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Reporting from Los Angeles.

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What happened to fun? In the clinical white of the gallery, art can be forbidding, aggrieved, elite, academic. Shouldn't it also, sometimes, be joyous?

The collaborators behind Luna Luna thought so. This was the amusement park staged in Hamburg, Germany, in 1987, where nearly 30 professional artists including Basquiat, Hockney and Dalí designed the rides. About 250,000 people attended that summer — families, children, students, hipsters seeking reprieve. But shoestring funding and a thwarted tour let the production sit, disassembled and forgotten in storage, for 35 years.

Now, at a staggering cost nearing nine figures, about half the attractions have been restored, beautifully, and arranged for the public in a new show in Los Angeles titled “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy.”



Gathering in front of Kenny Scharf's airbrushed swing ride at Luna Luna. Kenny Scharf/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Though I came expecting to spin until sick on Kenny Scharf's airbrushed swing ride, Luna Luna is not participatory. You can walk among but not touch its rides, which are installed in a hangar, lined in black carpet, near the city's downtown. Despite dramatic lighting, the presence of live clowns (beware) and the appropriately bubbly soundtrack by Philip Glass from the fair's debut and a new composition by Daniel Wohl, this exhibition, with considerable didactics, is the kind of thing a museum might mount if it had the money. (Funding came privately, mostly from the production company of the rapper Drake. Live Nation was enlisted for the remount.)

The sheer scale and volume of the rides allows certain very commercialized and very reproduced artists to impress in a new way. Keith Haring's cartoon avatars, brought to candy-lacquered life as large seats on his merry-go-round, seem finally to have found their natural habitat. As for Jean-Michel Basquiat, a pleasure craft is the most successful canvas for his deadpan: On a primed white Ferris wheel, his black glyphs adorning each gondola symbolize some aspect of chaos or Americana or slapstick, while his anatomical drawings covering the wheel's buttresses poke fun at the bodily thrill of the whirl.



The Keith Haring merry-go-round at Luna Luna. These vessels of fun recall the free-for-all of their downtown New York scene. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

These dedicated vessels of fun seem truest to the free-for-all of their downtown New York scene. The Mudd Club, the New Museum, the Fun Gallery. Some of these installations also fulfill Pop's ideal merger of leisure and art, as the boutiques Mr. Freedom and Big Biba did in London, or Haring's Pop Shop in New York.

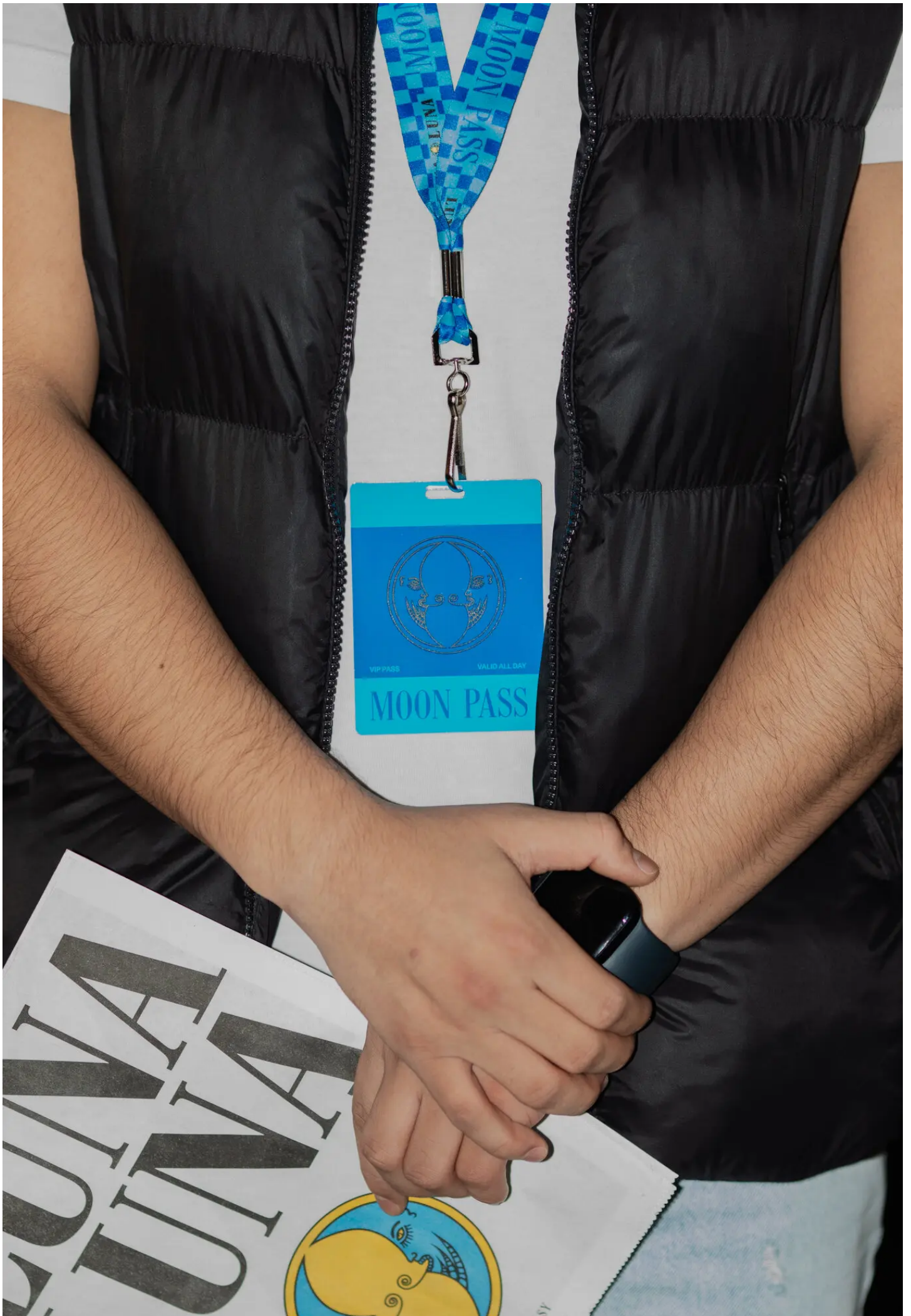
Behind velvet ropes, though, Roy Lichtenstein's labyrinth, about the size of a mobile home, says little. Three walls of his typical stripe-matrix geometry conceal what appears to be a maze of glass panes — but distance makes it hard to say. At worst, some of these restagings give a whiff of what another parodist of the era, Weird Al Yankovic, calls “mandatory fun.”

André Heller, the Austrian impresario who organized the original Luna Luna, made it fairly international, a goofball biennale: His artists were also Czech, English, French, German, Spanish, Swiss, Russian. Before her death in 1979 at 94, the Ukrainian-born Sonia Delaunay, pioneer of nonobjective art since Kandinsky's day, designed the fair's triumphal archway. As you pass through it, gawking up at her bisected spheres and panes of color, you suddenly understand the dimensional origins of abstraction. It's terrific.



Attendees at Sonia Delaunay's triumphal entrance archway. Gazing up at her bisected spheres and panes of color, you suddenly understand the origins of abstraction.

Alex Welsh for The New York Times



A V.I.P. "Moon Pass" at Luna Luna, which separate the haves from the have mores. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Most pointedly, Luna, which was staged in West Germany, also represented the territory then known as East: Georg Baselitz, born in prewar Deutschbaselitz, contributed a pavilion that manipulated the shadows of its entrants, and Jörg Immendorff, from postwar Bleckede, built a shooting gallery. Neither are in the new show, but an excellent catalog from Phaidon — it's a reprinting and English translation of the original — documents the full fair in the lovely night-lit photography of Sabina Sarnitz.

The unspoken specter is the wall — or walls — that from 1961 divided Berlin and Germany into the communist East and the democratic West, stanching the free movement of people (under pain of death) and, to some extent, ideas. Opened only months before Wim Wenders's filmic masterpiece about partition (and circuses), "Wings of Desire," was released in West Germany, Luna Luna seems to have conjured the internationalism that Germany craved for so long — and would soon get, in 1989.

If you really stop and think, rearing its head is a more distant political past. On view here is "Excrement Law Firm," by the Romanian-born food artist Daniel Spoerri, whose father was killed by Nazis. This mock-fascist facade, pushed up against a warehouse wall, with victory columns topped in huge sculptures of human effluent, originally led to the fair's bathrooms.



Daniel Spoerri's installation at Luna Luna is "Excrement Law Firm," a mock-fascist facade with victory columns topped in huge sculptures of human effluent. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ProLitteris, Zurich. Photograph by Alex Welsh for The New York Times



"Palace of the Winds" by Manfred Deix. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

ich bin kein Marxist
 aber ich liebe Marx vielleicht
 mehr als viele Marxisten
 und an ihm glauben.
 nur aus dem
 bel in entwickel
 für Pflicht
 sich im
 gehen, nur
 : geht ist garke
 aber
 KEIT ist KAPITAL
 hat also im Pro
 (Wirtschaft.) nicht
 als nur ver
 ARBEIT nur
 isches (Bourgeois
 Besitz

Attendees in front of the Joseph Beuys manifesto. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Then there is the “Palace of the Winds,” an oversize stage marquee by the Austrian political cartoonist Manfred Deix depicting adults, pants down, passing gas with force and glee. TV screens now play footage of the stage’s debut performance: a concert violinist and two bare-bottomed flatulists interpreting the “Blue Danube” waltz.

Scatology on this scale tries one’s definition of humor. (When the footage pans the crowd, Haring can be seen blinking coldly.) But it also conveys the devotion of European artists to the absurd, a quality their American counterparts somewhat lacked and maybe needed less.

The real party pooper (I’m sorry) is Joseph Beuys. Though he did not live to see the launch of Luna Luna, the German father of performance art contributed a short manifesto. Blown up in the present warehouse like a bus stop ad, this document asserts, citing Marx, that “Money is not capital. Rather, ability is capital.”



Jaime Wright, left, and Trisha Williams, right, enter Salvador Dali’s mirror dome, one of three installations with which V.I.P. pass holders can engage. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Marx? At the fair? Oh, brother. But Beuys started it, so here goes:

In 1987 Luna Luna cost visitors 20 deutsche mark, the currency of West Germany. (Children visited for free on weekdays.) Today that would be about \$22. By contrast, “Forgotten Fantasy” costs \$38 on weekdays, \$47 on weekends. (Children ages 3 to 13 are \$20 always.) Family of 5 on a Saturday? With fees and tax, that starts at about \$200.

But you will need a V.I.P. “Moon” pass, at a cost of \$85, if you want to engage with the three installations that allow it: You can roam David Hockney’s wooden pavilion, with its two concentric rings of walls comprising brightly colored plywood pieces that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, and its bespoke classical soundtrack, or enter Salvador Dali’s mirror dome (for your “immersive” photo op) or “get married” in Heller’s play chapel. In the name of journalism, my friend and I wed and can report that the fun lies in the couple-watching. (Non-V.I.P. patrons, it should be noted, can marry for an additional \$10.)

Bright blue lanyards signal the V.I.P. purchase, and posted QR codes invite you to upgrade. That family of 5? Now \$500.30. It divides the haves from the have-mores.



Suthinee Kasemsomporn, left, and Matt Mayes, right, are “married” at André Heller’s Wedding Chapel at Luna Luna. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

This exhibition was terribly complicated to pull off — acquisition, restoration, transportation, venue, rights. But by charging like this, by setting up tiered admission to the same show and by promoting it with photographs of the real thing, packed with children frolicking on these wild gazebos, “Forgotten Fantasy” cements the exclusions — of access, of taste — that Luna Luna sought to dismantle. Power is capital, yes. But if any act can be art, as Beuys fervently believed, so, too, must be the means of encounter.

I saw kids in Basquiat shirts and Haring hoodies. I saw art people in Balenciaga. I saw groups posing for selfies and enjoying themselves. I saw a question, too, and, sadly, an answer: Who is this really for? Not those who need it most.

Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy

Through Spring 2024, 1601 East 6th Street, Los Angeles; lunaluna.com.

A correction was made on Jan. 5, 2024: An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a photographer of Luna Luna, the art amusement park, whose work appears in a catalog from Phaidon. She is Sabina Sarnitz, not Sabrina.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: A Vintage Vision Is Revived, at a Staggering Cost