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Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy
A Journey Back in Time
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In Hamburg, Germany, from June 4 – August 31, 1987, *Luna Luna* opened to the public. Conceived by Austrian artist André Heller, it was an open-air museum billed as the “*world’s first art amusement park*.” Heller invited more than 30 artists from numerous countries to participate, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Josef Beuys, Salvador Dali, Sonia Delaunay, Monika GilSing, Keith Haring, David Hockney, Rebecca Horn, Roy Lichtenstein and Kenny Scharf. After the exhibit closed in 1987, it was scheduled for display in the United States but, the story goes, Heller had disagreements with the handling of *Luna Luna*’s American launch. This provoked years of litigation and landed the artworks (packed into 44 shipping containers) somewhere in the middle of Texas, where they remained for many years.

Quoting from a *Yahoo!Finance* article by Suzi Coen (December 4, 2023) (<https://ca.finance.yahoo.com/news/rapper-drake-breathes-life-luna-194152518.html?>) “an estimated 250,000 people visited the fairground in 1987. André Heller had hoped *Luna Luna* would then tour the world, but his plans fell apart. Three years later he agreed to sell the whole project to the Stephen and Mary Birch Foundation, who had hoped to show it in San Diego. Because of complications, the plans were never executed and *Luna Luna* was moved to rural Texas in 2007, where it was left untouched for another 15 years. The creative director Michael Goldberg first discovered *Luna Luna* in 2019, and became obsessed with the project during the Covid pandemic. He then pitched the idea to the rapper, Drake. The crated artworks were purchased, sight unseen by Drake and his company DreamCrew, and shipped to Los Angeles in 2022.”

A downtown warehouse was secured, the crates unpacked and examined, walls built and painted so that the artworks that comprised the original *Luna Luna* could be seen once again. In early 2024, *Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy* opened to great public acclaim in Los Angeles, where it is scheduled to be on view through Spring 2024.

The difference between the original and the current iterations is experiential. In Germany, the display was outside. The rides functioned. The space was active. The atmosphere was like a party or a carnival. Here, in Los Angeles, the project has been “museified.” It feels more like documentation — objects and displays that can be viewed passively rather than actively — and

in this sense, it disappoints.

After being directed to the appropriate parking area, viewers enter a vast, darkened warehouse space. Once inside, they are given a map and told that there are numerous guides to answer questions about the exhibition. One can wander at leisure through two connected spaces while reading about the original display of the works, but able to see them only as static objects in this contrived setting. While each artist created a unique and meaningful piece for the 1987 showcase, they don't resonate in the same way today as they probably did then. *Why* is the dominant question. Is it because many of the artist have passed away — Beuys, Haring, Basquiat, Lichtenstein, etc.— and we are now seeing their pieces in relation to their life spans and trying to contextualize them within their career trajectory?

What stands out? In 2024, immersive installations, technology driven works and digital displays are a given. While Dali's *Dalidom*, one of the few structures that can be entered in the current iteration, is a geodesic dome and mirror chamber — for today's audiences, it is a selfie opportunity reminiscent of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Rooms*. Keith Haring's work was the subject of a recent retrospective at the Broad Museum (*Keith Haring: Art is For Everybody*, May 27 – October 8, 2023) and although the murals and painted carousel he created for *Luna Luna* are fantastic representations of his iconic mark-making, today's audience is quite familiar with his work. The same can be said for Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose quirky paintings and drawings were also recently on display in Los Angeles (*Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure*, March 31 – October 15, 2023). In retrospect his *Painted Ferris Wheel* is quintessential Basquiat.

Missing from the experience are the crowds, the cheers and the sounds— as music was also an important component of many of the artworks. In *Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy*, lights occasionally dim and then shine on the different pieces to shift audiences' attention through the space. Scharf created cartoony creatures that are presented here as stand-alone sculptures. Because the ceiling of the indoor space was too low to place other figures on top of a swinging chair ride with as they were originally, they sit, forlorn, nearby.

As conceived of and first presented in Germany, *Luna Luna* was a participatory spectacle. In Los Angeles, *Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy* is a historic display with a few enterable installations, but for the most part functions as roped off exhibits along with plenty of documentation. To augment and highlight the original presentation, there are displays of artifacts, walls of photographs, as well as historical timelines to contextualize the artists and their works. Is *Luna Luna* fun? For sure. Educational? Of course. Innovative? At the time, yes. Worth the trip? Sure, because it gives L.A. audiences a chance to experience the artworks created for the 1987 event, and to view long forgotten works, some of which are seminal pieces in these artist's careers. But also no, because it is expensive and ultimately a bit of a disappointment due to the hands-off nature when compared to its 100% hands-on original presentation.

Resurrecting *Luna Luna* was clearly a costly endeavor, and while the installation feels like it could be in a museum, it came about through private funding and is costly to visit. To de-crate, restore, transport and then re-install the artworks took time and a huge team. It was an admirable effort and the organizers should be applauded. Is it an exceptional art experience? No, but as a journey back in time, and as a way to view what occurred in a specific place at a specific moment, it is worth a visit, despite the cost.

<https://artnowla.com/2024/04/01/luna-luna-forgotten-fantasy/>