

Moon, laub, and Love

It was early afternoon on the last Saturday in January when artists Jennifer Moon and laub, newly lovers and collaborators, maneuvered an odd contraption across the porch of a fake old-Western house. Never meant for real inhabitants, the house belongs to Paramount Ranch, a town built as a movie set. The artists' contraption consisted of, among other things, green and yellow glass tubes, a hamster cage, a wooden stand and a hand-drawn sign that read: "Donate \$1 to the Revolution." Moon has been planning the Revolution, with various degrees of dedication, for years. laub (who always writes his name in lowercase letters) has been involved since the two artists met in July 2015 ("I'm in the Revolution," laub apparently told Moon—a perfect pick-up line)! Once situated on the porch, laub would take out a banjo. Moon would lecture, wearing the same black, sleeveless dress and shiny fanny pack she's worn in other recent performances.

An art fair droned on around them. Since its inception, the Paramount Ranch fair's Hollywood-engineered, Deadwood-style setting, just far enough from L.A., has purportedly underscored its identity as an off-the-grid pioneer among art fairs. Really, you see many of the same people at the Ranch as at the concurrent, professionalized ALAC fair in Santa Monica. Only, at the Ranch, visitors wear boots and plaid instead of suits or heels. The town is a facsimile of a frontier, the fair a facsimile of an alternative. So, even though their names were on the

official roster, Moon and laub—whose work really does explore off-gridding—seemed like interlopers, or minstrel panhandlers, using the fair to fund-raise unabashedly for the bigger project that consumes them.

When listing life-artists, who turned their lives into art performatively, it's still primarily those from the dawn of conceptualism who come to mind: Lee Lozano, Stephen Kaltenbach, Linda Montano, and David Hammons, among others. Moon and laub play into this lineage; they're interested in art as a tool for living. And now that they're working and living together, it's hard to engage with their art without thinking about their personal relationship. But unlike their predecessors—who, as conceptualist Hans Haacke pointed out in a 2007 interview, started working when no establishment was really paying attention—Moon and laub are participating in the current, ultra-professionalized version of the art world. Moon, after all, won the People's Choice award at the Hammer's *Made in L.A.* Biennial in 2014. Plus, she and laub keep talking about revolution, something that requires public attention to succeed. Thus, the balance between earnest, open-ended self-exploration and public strategy is a key (sometimes confusing) component of their life-art.

Jennifer Moon was still studying art at UCLA in 1993, when she made a pact to give up romantic love in favor of art. Even now, the pact comes up as pivotal in her writing and in interviews she gives. After receiving an MFA from Art Center in 2002, drug addiction took her out of the local art scene, and a crack-inspired robbery attempt landed her in prison for nine

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles. She is currently art critic for *LA Weekly* and frequently contributes to a number of other publications.

months of an eighteen-month sentence. In prison, she “learned of love.”

Her first show post-prison at the artist-run space Commonwealth & Council in 2012 was called *Phoenix Rising, Part 1: This is Where I Learned of Love*. The show documented her prison experience and consisted of framed photographs of objects—a waterproof watch, a plastic typewriter, and her certificate of discharge—hanging above cardboard shelves. Each shelf held a copy of the same book, also called *This is Where I Learned of Love*. The book described the significance of the photographed objects and included love letters Moon wrote while incarcerated. At first glance, the whole object-text arrangement felt dry and rational. But in the book, which viewers were reminded to read at every turn, Moon grapples openly with how to be a vulnerable revolutionary. She describes attending a parenting class at the correctional institute (“just to get the fuck out of my cell”). The instructor asked the women to make a list of “Twenty Things You Love to Do!” and to share one thing with the whole group. Moon responded that she loves to “plan & execute the revolution to destroy capitalism and other oppressive forces.”

Another prisoner wanted to know if Moon was incarcerated for fighting oppression, and Moon wished that she was. She liked that fantasy: the incarcerated radical working away at manifestos. But she’s the kind of revolutionary leader who slips up, gives into impulses and, in some ways, thrived behind bars, with all control wrested from her. Later in the book, she recounts acts of tenderness in the prison yard, and her first romantic relationship with a woman. She writes, “There is more sharing here than I have ever witnessed out in the free world.” When she began making art again, she would try to channel that

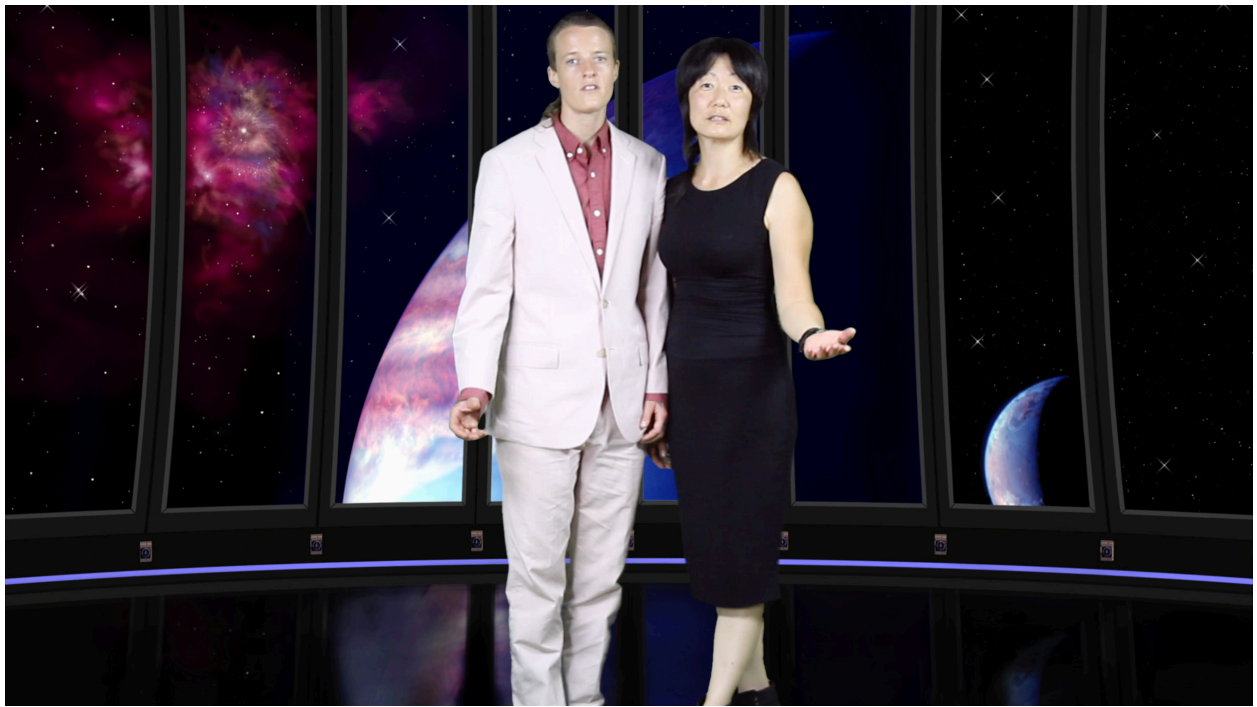
kind of sharing, exposing her own life to viewers and losing herself in collaborations.

Before Moon began collaborating with laub, she had already presented *Phoenix Rising, Part 2* at the Hammer Museum. That installation was sexier than *Part 1*—in one piece, Moon posed like Huey P. Newton, and appearing as a tiny figurine inside a gorgeous sculpted egg, about to fly off a cliff to her death (she’d decided age 80 was an ideal age to die, or to execute her “last performance”). In her *Book of Eros*, she listed all romantic or sexual encounters since 1993. She designed this book in an attempt to nullify the pact she’d made years ago, which kept her from ever having a thriving art practice and love life simultaneously. (She often quotes Michael Hardt, who argues we’ve neutered love’s political power by isolating the more personal, passionate Eros from the more communal Agape).²

Phoenix Rising, Part 3: laub, me and the Revolution (The Theory of Everything) opened at Commonwealth & Council in November 2015. The last installment in Moon’s *Phoenix Rising* series, it looked a bit like a grade-school science fair. Tiny 3D modeled figurines of Moon and laub stood on a pedestal, about to enter the unwieldy, waist-high maze of Hamster tubes that took up much of the main gallery. Throughout the maze, you could see various additional laub and Moon figurines, and collections of their entangled limbs, shooting through to another reality. A video, made in that magical “Cosmos with Carl Sagan” style, played in a side gallery. Graphics in the video could be quite complex, but a thin, hard-to-hear audio made the video seem impulsively made. “Love is neither a closed system,” Moon says near the end, “nor is it the absorption into preexisting romantic relationship rules, designed

1. laub recounts saying this in an August 2015 interview with Emi Kuiyama on *Notes on Looking*. Kuiyama, Emi. “The Theory of Everything: A Conversation with Emi Kuiyama, Jennifer Moon, and Laub.” *Notes on Looking*. Aug. 2015. Web.

2. Michael Hardt discussed about as a political concept in his 2007 lecture at the European Graduate School, and in his co-authored book *Multitude* (2004). Moon explored his ideas in her debut *Adventures Within* podcast in July 2012. Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004. Print.



to create a system rooted in hierarchy, binaries and capital.” laub, wearing a white suit, enters the frame: “Much like faith, it does not stem from anything we currently know or understand in the observable world.” Then they ask us to journey with them, away from certainty toward a space where the rules of behavior remain unformed. The video’s final moments have a cultish feel.

In work by earlier practitioners of life art, this dance between self-involvement and evangelism occasionally takes place too. Conceptual artist Lee Lozano, whose art by this point in her career mainly consisted of written instructions for herself, made a statement to the Art Workers Coalition in April 1969: “I will not call myself an art worker but rather an art dreamer and I will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and political.” Her words, spoken in a public forum, suggested that others should join. Later, though, when she dropped out of the art world altogether, her withdrawal from a public arena made her life-art seem more introspective

and private than it had before. When Linda Montano chose to convert back to the Catholic faith late in life—a simultaneously aesthetic and sincere act that would bring her life full circle (she had been raised Catholic)—she could no longer read tarot cards or dabble in mysticism as she had before, publically or privately. Critics and historians wrote about Montano’s life shift, but her return to Catholicism still seemed largely personal, not a conceptual shift that would require anything of her audience.

Moon and laub’s effort to integrate their personal relationship into a public call for revolution sometimes makes them feel like anglers, or comic actors. “You don’t believe that Moon and laub believe what they are saying, but you can’t help but wonder if they’re on to something,” wrote David Pagel in an *L.A. Times* review.

Just before *Phoenix Rising, Part 3* closed in December, the two artists did a performance in the intimate basement theater at Machine Project in Echo Park. Part of Machine’s *Explorations in Teledildonics* series,

it combined monologues with short lectures about God, trust, and sex. Moon and laub appeared stiff during the performance. (“Jennifer and I, we have sex together,” laub said at one point.) It seemed they hadn’t yet figured out how to instrumentalize their personal intimacy sincerely, in order to inspire an audience. You wanted them to either be more charismatically Billy Graham-like (so their desire for a more radical world would grab you in the gut), or more messily personal (even though wanting them to further mine their personal dynamic felt salacious).

Not long after they met, in August, Moon had laub on her monthly podcast, *Adventures Within*. In that context, their connection felt rawer. They’re uncertainty kept rearing. On the podcast, they discussed the concern their friends had when they got together and Moon started posting about their relationship on Facebook and Instagram. The advertising of their fast intimacy made people uncomfortable, afraid one or the other would get hurt. “I’m fine to be hurt,” said Moon.

“Do you think it’s love?” laub asked at one point, about their relationship.

“I think it’s love. But I’m probably pretty quick to say things are love,” replied Moon.

“I think something that’s happening in this relationship is the breaking down of what is real....of the emotions that come with love, and of faith, I’d say.”

“The breaking down of it to get to what?”

“To get to what?”

“To get to a purity. A realness of it?” asked Moon. “What are we trying to do? What are we doing?”

“I don’t know,” said laub.

They agree they are figuring something out together, in the open, and because their relationship is also the subject of their collective public art practice, their project/ relationship feels daring and unhinged. There’s no clear strategy discernible behind the progression of their relationship, just an eagerness to understand that’s compelling partly because it’s still so unformed.

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Jennifer Moon and laub,
Video still from *3CE: A Relational
Love Odyssey* (2015). HD video
(TRT: 11:15). Image courtesy of
the artists and Commonwealth
and Council.