

Moonstruck

Photographic Explorations

The artists: Edy Brunner, Joan Fontcuberta, Max Grüter, Daniela Keiser, James Nasmyth, Robert Pufleb & Nadine Schlieper, Luciano Rigolini, Lewis M. Rutherford, Bianca Salvo, Pierrick Sorin, Christian Waldvogel

The first manned Moon landing on 20 July 1969 (CET) was the greatest technological adventure of all time. Fifty years after man first set foot on the surface of the Moon, the Fotostiftung Schweiz (Swiss Foundation for Photography) takes a look back at photographic representation of this celestial body, which has captured the human imagination since time immemorial. Rather than being a scientific or documentary study of the Moon, the exhibition focuses on the translation of an elusive experience into images. The 'demystification' of the Moon is a shock but it has also released artistic energy. Romantic glorification has given way to a debate about humanity's place in the universe. This is expressed in conceptual and epistemological approaches which nonetheless preserve the sensual fascination that emanates from the Moon.

To date, only twelve human beings have ever set foot on this satellite of the Earth. Our concept of the Moon – and of Earth as a 'blue marble' – has therefore been shaped almost entirely by visual media; without having gone through the process of creating images, we would have had only a very rudimentary idea of its nature. Photographs, television cameras and other imaging techniques determine the way we picture the Moon, the cosmos and space travel, and how we see our place in the universe. The Moon is therefore an example for what Jean Baudrillard described in his theory of simulation: symbols and reality are increasingly becoming indistinguishable from one another.

The Moon as a media event

The transformation of the Moon into a media happening reached its zenith with the first manned Moon landing. Being a part of the event via live TV broadcast was almost as miraculous for television viewers as the Moon landing itself. More than half a billion people gathered in front of their television screens – the biggest simultaneous event in history at the time. The three major US television channels showed the Apollo 11 mission for a total of 31 hours and distributed the footage across the globe (with the exception of the People's Republic of China, where the Moon landing officially never took place). The press followed suit – in 1969 alone, *Life* magazine dedicated seven front pages to the Moon missions. "Never before in the history of mankind has an event been followed and experienced with such passionate interest; never before has a human enterprise triggered such an exuberant outpouring of enthusiasm", wrote the Swiss magazine *Schweizer Illustrierte* on 4 August 1969.

This collective euphoria was not least due to the American communications strategy – compared to military operations in the past, the Apollo mission was an open book. NASA's PR specialists argued that, in a sense, the media were the very point of the mission. Watched live, unedited and everywhere, it became a genuine experience of global intimacy.

This exhibition presents eleven perspectives showing how artists have used the medium of photography to react to the Moon, its 'conquest', and the enormous number of images produced in the course of one of the most momentous events of the 20th century. In addition to selected historical works, the exhibition features primarily contemporary pieces and installations.

The artists

The title of our exhibition, *Moonstruck. Photographic Explorations*, is immediately echoed in **Max Grüter**'s group of works (Switzerland, born 1955). A sprawling dark grey carpet evokes the surface of the Moon. A large number of footprints created by astronauts have left their mark in the pile of the carpet. The photographic references are obvious: Buzz Aldrin's boot print left in the Moon dust on 21 July 1969 is one of the most iconic images of the 20th century. It symbolises the possession and demystification of this celestial body to all those left behind on Earth.

The footprints appear to have no goal, however, crisscrossing the carpet with no sense of direction – an ironic commentary on the questionable integrity of the Apollo programme, whose main purpose was to win the Space Race, essentially a proxy war in the conflict between the two major political systems.

To this day, astronauts represent an idealised, Americanised manifestation of masculinity. Grüter's *Figur auf rotem Quadrat (Figure on a red square)* (2008) provides a stark contrast to this: a deeply human antihero looks out at us, a Don Quixote far removed from reality. With this fictional character that bears his facial features, Grüter subtly caricatures the patriarchal, technology-driven values of space travel. An accompanying manual reveals this to be a “deportation of a meteorite” (he is holding the meteorite in his right hand), adding a further sociocritical note to the presentation.

In his six-part sequence *Kosmodrom* (2001), Grüter reconstructs his parents' living room (which no longer exists), where he experienced the Moon landing. This theatre of the absurd conveys the enormous discrepancy between Earth and space, and also the dehumanisation which occurred through technology (Günther Anders) in the form of the spacesuit, which, according to Grüter, “represents the final level of abstraction of the human form [...]”. Space travel and the use of digital design techniques to produce images have been Max Grüter's primary field of experimentation since as far back as the 1980s.

The tables by **James Nasmyth** (UK, 1809 – 1890) denote a point of origin for our exhibition – this Scottish engineer, inventor, and astronomer succeeded in creating pictures of craters and maria on the Moon in unprecedented (and, for decades to come, unparalleled) detail and dramatic verisimilitude.

However, as ‘true to life’ as they may seem, these images are not actually photographs of the Moon. That would have been a feat far beyond the capabilities of astrophotography at the time. Instead, Nasmyth shaped the contours of the lunar surface in plaster on the basis of the observations he had made through his telescope. He then photographed his plaster models in oblique light, which gave them an extremely three-dimensional quality. Reproduced as high-quality Woodburytypes, they were used to illustrate the scientific study *The Moon: considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite* which Nasmyth published together with his co-author James Carpenter in 1874.

Nasmyth used his studies to promote his central scientific dogma – that lunar craters were volcanic in origin and not the result of a cosmic bombardment. Despite ultimately being proven wrong, this example shows that the photographic staging of reality in anticipation of what is yet to come can appear ‘more true to life’ than reality itself.

A hundred years later, **Luciano Rigolini** (Switzerland, born 1950) surveyed the lunar surface at close range. His sequences of square photographs of the surface of the Moon reveal very little – just dust and rocks – and yet the interplay of forms gives way to new shapes and patterns that are a constant challenge for the eye. The photographs chosen from the NASA archives were taken by astronauts using a Hasselblad 500EL camera during the Apollo 15 and 16 missions. The Réseau crosses used to detect image distortions highlight their scientific purpose. In his representation of the Moon, Rigolini breaks with any iconic, sentimental or heroic representation of this astronomical body. Nevertheless,

his minimalist approach endows these images with a surprising poetic dimension – an intentional echo of Buzz Aldrin’s famous phrase “magnificent desolation”, which the second man on the Moon used to express his feelings at the time.

Rigolini’s work combines a great respect for the integrity of the photographic document with the desire to unleash its imaginary and aesthetic potential. The content recedes behind pronounced forms and structures. References to land art, minimal art, minimal music and conceptual art are obvious. The question “What do we see?” is superseded by the question “How do we see?”.

Joan Fontcuberta (Spain, born 1955) also explores the ideal of photographic realism, albeit from the opposite point of departure – the episodic narrative presented here tells the story of Ivan Istochnikov, a Russian cosmonaut who, as we learn, was lost in space under mysterious circumstances during the flight of Soyuz 2 in 1968. In order to cover up this failure, Istochnikov was erased from history by the Soviet bureaucracy. His image was removed from photos and his family were deported to Siberia. Despite the wealth of facts that establish credibility, the events ‘documented’ here are entirely fictitious and most of the ‘facts’ were fabricated by the artist himself. The photographs of Istochnikov are deceptively authentic reenactments of the way the media shaped the public perception of cosmonauts such as Yuri Gagarin. To add a veneer of authenticity to the narrative, Fontcuberta spent ten years researching the subject and interviewing former cosmonauts.

His forgery demonstrates the fact that museal and scientific forms of presentation are infused with an authority and an aura of credibility that is transferred to the exhibits and content themselves. It is a deliberate act of medial intoxication that uses humour to make us aware of the suggestive power of photographic information.

Space as a vast projection screen for technical fantasies, faith in progress, escapism and cultural critique is echoed in the collection of images *The Universe Makers* (2016 – 2018) by **Bianca Salvo** (Italy, born 1986). It explores the role that photography, technology, science fiction and other media play in shaping our vision of the universe. The installation brings together footage found in the archives with Salvo’s own staged photographs and collages.

The artist directs the viewer’s attention to an underappreciated fact which is hinted at in the title of the work – historical images of cosmic worlds were primarily produced by NASA. When we look at the Moon, we see an American Moon. This is accompanied by a deliberate visual rhetoric – photography played a decisive role in securing support for American dominance in space. Judging by the media response, the Moon landing was one of the most successful PR campaigns of all time.

Hence it has become virtually impossible to separate the information content of the images from their mythical and iconic aura. To the extent that they bear testimony to an event, they are also intrinsically imbued with the pageantry of their production.

If any work of art can claim to do justice to the magnitude of the Moon landing, it has to be *Apollo 11* (1969) – itself a colossal feat – by **Edy Brunner** (Switzerland, born 1943). It is made up of 23,688 individual photographs in screen-like plastic frames. The impressive, convention-shattering format pays tribute to this extraordinary enterprise, which until then had been beyond the realms of human imagination.

To create the work, Edy Brunner set up a camera in front of a colour television set and took a picture every second for the entire duration of the live broadcast. This allows us to follow the mission in detail as it unfolds – or rather: the media’s version of the event. For, in addition to the rocket launch, the first steps on the Moon and the landing in the Pacific eight days later, the footage also includes pictures of the colour test card (colour TV was introduced in Switzerland on 1 October 1968), animations of the landing process, and interviews with experts. Edy Brunner’s work is a vivid monument to the march to dominance of the still relatively young medium of television. In the words of Eugene

Cernan, the last astronaut to set foot on the Moon: “The power of television is unbelievable. [...] What you are seeing is happening at this instant. [...] [T]he thing that brought so much prestige to this country is that every launch, every landing on the Moon, and every walk on the Moon was given freely to the world in real time. We didn’t doctor up the movie, didn’t edit anything out; what was said was said.”

Switzerland’s Federal Art Commission also recognised the avant-garde conceptual and process-oriented character of this work by Edy Brunner, who at the time was involved in the Bernese art scene centred around Harald Szeemann – in 1970, it became the first photographic work to be honoured with an art scholarship.

The way the Apollo astronauts portrayed the Moon in words and images was sober and straight-forward (the complete sound recordings are freely available on the NASA website). Their language was technical and characterised by jargon and dry humour. There was no room for poetic metaphors. In stark contrast to this, **Daniela Keiser** (Switzerland, born 1963) returns the Moon to the realm of human, sensual experience. Her wall installation *Temporary Urban Spaces* (2017 – 2018) follows the most palpable influence of the Moon on our planet: the tides. For a period of six months, Keiser repeatedly visited the banks of the River Thames in London, where the tidal range can be as much as seven metres. What she witnessed there proved to be unexpectedly magical – bright green and brown mosses in vertical gardens, colourful pebbles and polished bricks, a sheer infinite diversity of patterns and colour variations. Temporary spaces emerge and disappear again in rhythm with the pulse of the Thames.

Keiser works with repetitions, variations, and slight shifts that sharpen our perception. None of the pictures shows the sky or any buildings. The only thing we see are the foundations of the city – an invitation to imagine our own castles in the sky. As previously seen in her work *bergen* (2011 – 2013) which addresses the theme of the rubble mountains of Berlin, she is particularly interested in the foundations upon which our society is built. The artist approaches this topic using an indirect, abstract, and at the same time highly poetic metaphor.

Only twelve people ever had the opportunity to physically experience the Moon with all their senses. We who were left behind have to make do with images. But do these images line up with the impressions of the Apollo astronauts? And how do the astronauts themselves remember the things they experienced?

These are the questions posed by the artist **Christian Waldvogel** (Switzerland, born 1971). In the experiment shown here, he attempts to fathom how to adequately communicate and reproduce the astronauts’ individual realities. For this purpose, he asked Charlie Duke, the pilot of the 1972 Apollo 16 lunar module, to answer the following questions: What does the Earth look like from the Moon? How big does it appear when seen from there? And how many stars did you see in the Moon’s sky? For each question, the astronaut chose the image that best corresponded to his perception and memory from a series of pictures provided by the artist.

Waldvogel thereby subjects photography – and the world – to a profound reflection on the relationship between human perception and mechanically produced representations. His work is characterised by an attempt to overcome the limits of our imagination by looking down at the world from the outside.

Ever since Galileo Galilei first observed the Moon through a telescope in 1609, it has been the dream of all selenographers to find the mechanical means to capture this celestial body in all its detail. The first person to accomplish this feat in outstanding quality was **Lewis M. Rutherfurd** (USA, 1816 – 1892). This pioneer of astrophotography was a gifted inventor and builder of telescopes and spectroscopes. His instruments were so advanced that they were used all over the world and made a

significant contribution to the progress of science. In December 1864, he completed his first telescope built specifically for astrophotography, using a 29 cm refractor. The instrument surpassed all his previous efforts – on 6 March 1865, Rutherford succeeded in taking the picture shown here, which he considered to be his finest, from his garden in the East Village in Manhattan, under a clear sky. The 4.3 cm negative was of sufficient quality to produce 53 cm prints. The unusual size of the print, its richness in nuances, the commanding presence of the Moon that mysteriously emerges out of the darkness of space – still today, this image has not lost any of its fascination. It marks the beginning of an extensive narrative tradition of photographic representations of the Moon. The copy which is presented here, mounted on cardboard, comes from the collection of the former Swiss Federal Observatory in Zurich (today: ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive).

The celestial bodies shown by **Robert Pufleb** (Germany, born 1969) and **Nadine Schlieper** (Germany, born 1976), which are mounted on the other side of the same wall, are just as magnificent, vivid, and detailed as Rutherford's Moon. However, they are of a quintessentially different nature – what you see is not what you are looking at. The idea came to the artists over breakfast – they noticed that the pancakes in their frying pan looked like little moons. From that point on, they honed their culinary skills until they had completely mastered their craft: some pancakes display perfect craters and peak rings; others are dominated by vast, dark maria.

The five-part sequence shown here is based on the phases of a lunar cycle and mimics the presentation forms of astronomical imaging. “We see the *Alternative Moons* as a metaphor for the way images are interpreted in these times of alternative facts and fake news”, say Schlieper and Pufleb. “They allow us to question the power of images in general, their imaginary objectivity and their enormous potential for manipulation.”

The title of the work is derived directly from the words of Trump's political advisor Kellyanne Conway, who made the claim in 2017 in her defence of the inflated crowd numbers at Donald Trump's presidential inauguration that ‘alternative facts’ had been used. *Alternative Moons* plays on our willingness to recall familiar things from memory and to find meaning to fill in any gaps in the image we see.

Pierrick Sorin (France, born 1960) also employs humour as an artistic device. First of all, he confronts visitors with a static-filled black-and-white video: it shows an astronaut on the surface of the Moon. The accumulation of moon dust, the fuzziness and the interference are all reminiscent of the original television footage of the Moon landings. Next, we encounter two people, one in a spacesuit, the other in a blue morphsuit. We gradually come to the realisation that we have entered the workshop of a devious forger: blue screen technology allows Sorin to set people against a different background – the Moon with the lunar module. The images fabricated here lead us to believe that the scene is actually taking place on the Moon. The two figures appear to be present in flesh and blood, yet they are just holographic projections that convey an astonishingly three-dimensional impression.

Sorin's images are rendered believable due to a perceptual phenomenon that Hito Steyerl has called the “uncertainty principle of modern documentarism”: the closer we seem to come to reality, the blurrier and shakier – und thereby ‘more real’ – it becomes.

Sorin creates a deceptively real illusion, but at the same time provides the key to resolving it. The supposed astronaut, for example, performs all kinds of silly stunts – such as juggling a Moon rock as if it were a football.

Sorin's work makes explicit reference to conspiracy theories that claim that the Moon landings were staged in a film studio. His main intention, however, is to draw attention to the poetic character of ‘fake’ images by harnessing the innate freedom they imply in terms of artistic and comedic potential.

Idea: Peter Pfrunder

Curator: Sascha Renner

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Special events

Friday 7 June, 6 pm Opening event

At 7.30 pm, curator Sascha Renner will introduce the exhibition.

Sunday 1 September, 11.30 pm Tour and dialogue with the artist

Edy Brunner in conversation with Sascha Renner.

Saturday 28 September, 6 pm: *Small Planets and Beautiful Galaxies. Science and Aesthetics.*

Conversation with Markus Griesser, Director of the Eschenberg Observatory, Winterthur.

Saturday 28 September, 8 pm: *Alternative Moons – Making of.* A culinary performance by Robert Pufleb and Nadine Schlieper (as part of the 2019 Winterthur Night of Culture).