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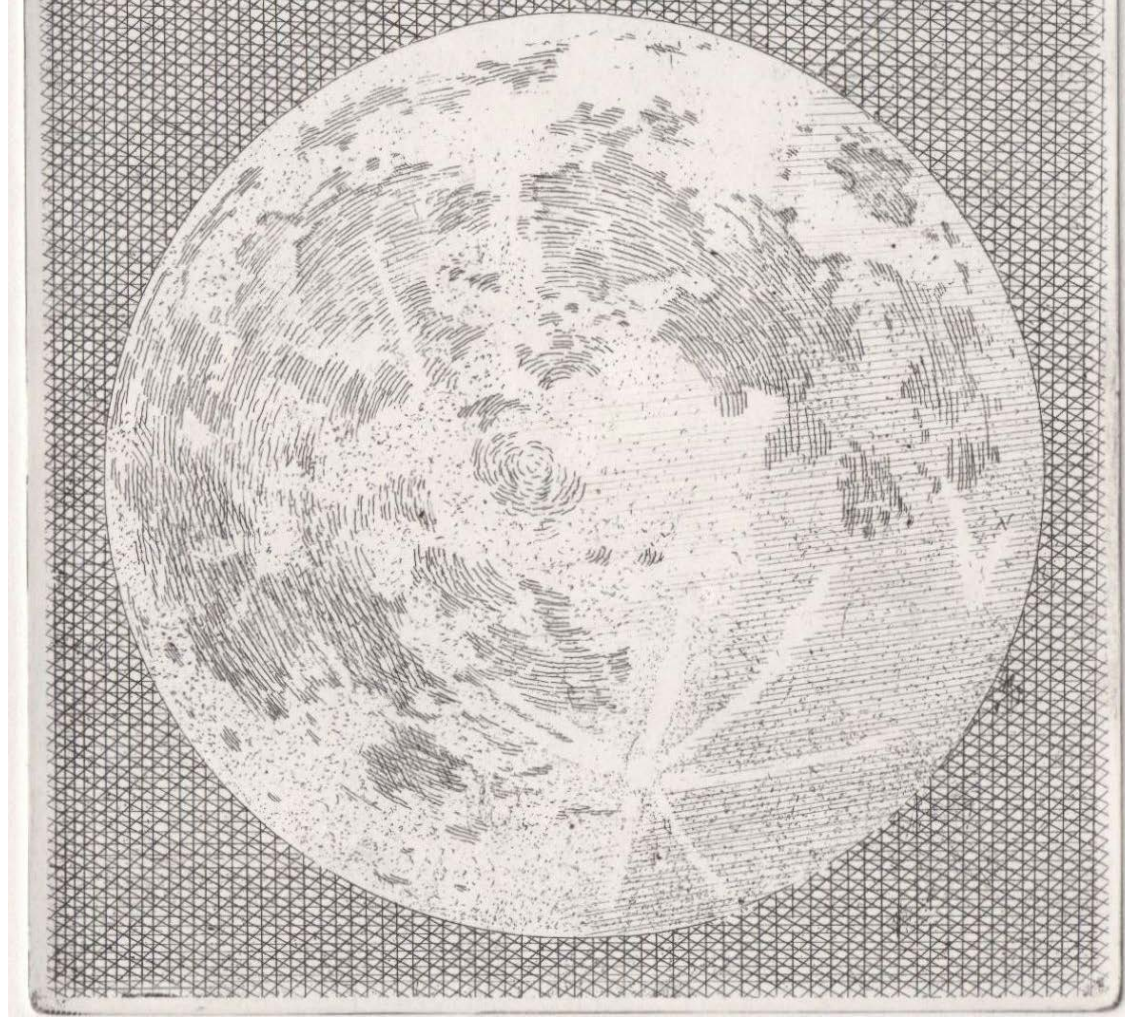
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

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In an earlier *Distraction / Abwechslung*, while briefly discussing the process of printing with regard to the afterlife of matrices, I compared the meeting of matrix and paper to what happens in a black box and quoted William Kentridge's poetic allusion to the "magick" of printmaking. Starting last Sunday, and continuing over the next five weeks, the Harvard art historian Jennifer L. Roberts is opening said box to look more closely at what she describes as the "radically invisible" moment of a print's creation, as she delivers the 70th A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts. Thanks to the ongoing pandemic, her talks are not confined to the National Gallery of Art's auditorium in Washington, D.C., but are available online to a wider public.

Jennifer L. Roberts, The Mellon Lectures

Judging from the first lecture, this series will surely become mandatory viewing for anyone with even the mildest interest in the nature of prints. Roberts "unpacks" what prints are at their most fundamental level. She describes them as records "of an event that took place beyond the realm of looking" (so my black-box metaphor wasn't totally off), making them "remnants of a moment of contact" during which an image is transferred between two surfaces. The word "contact" resonated with me in a variety of ways. Roberts chose it as the main title of her series—*Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*—and I had also encountered it in the title of an essay by the British artist Alexander Massouras. Published in 2019, "Points of Contact" is as brief as it is brilliant.



Alexander Massouras, *possibly because of staying up too long*, etching, second (final) state

Like Roberts, Massouras starts with the "distinctive encounter between paper and ink" only to then look at the dimension of time that is present in the making of a print, albeit in a compressed form: "No matter how long the printing surface has been worked, more often than not, the printed image happens all at once. . . . The creative labour spent on the print is condensed into the instant." The essay was written as an introduction to an overview of printmaking in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet—and perhaps not surprising for such a sensitive portraitist of the moon—Massouras expands its reach even beyond the terrestrial realm when he references the first moon landing, calling it "the twentieth century's ultimate 'point of contact,' which generated its own print in the form of footprints on the surface of the moon."



Anyone who has seen Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* will remember the cut across eons of time when the bone used by an early humanoid to kill one of his or her kind is thrown high up in the air until it blends into a satellite in terrestrial orbit. It's tempting to reverse this trajectory for what could be called the

"ontology of print" project pursued by both Roberts and Massouras. Neil Armstrong's and Buzz Aldrin's footprints could then be seen as echoes of the imprints of hands left behind as contact marks by the prehistoric cave painters, who used their hands as stencils to create shadow images that are the very "remnants of a moment of contact" Roberts describes.



hand prints by an unknown artist, El Castillo Cave, Spain, ca. 35,000 BCE

When early on in her first talk Roberts discusses seals and their use as "proof of fidelity because of adjacency" and conceptually compares them to "contact relics" of the Middle Ages, she remarks on the essential difference between print and photograph, namely that in the latter the image transfer does not happen through contact but by light. Here a brief distracting sidenote might be in order to propose another century-spanning conceptual link. Looking at the biography of the inventor of printing, Johann Gensfleisch zur Laden, who later renamed himself after the family's homestead Gutenberg in the city of Mainz, one learns that he was interested in more than one kind of connectivity. Before his 42-line Latin Vulgate Bible, printed in Mainz in the first half of the 1440s, brought about the well-known revolution of information technology, Gutenberg lived in Strasbourg, where, in 1438, he engaged other patricians in venture-capital enterprises. One was the production of so-called *Pilgerspiegel*, badges cast from tin or lead that held a small convex mirror.



pilgrim badge with mirror frame, Aachen, ca. 1350–1400

The plan was to have them ready for the following year's *Aachener Heiligtumsfahrt*, the festive display of the relics of the cathedral in the imperial city. What precipitated the pilgrims' demand for these mirrors was their belief that by capturing the reflection of the reliquaries, the auratic powers of the relics would be transferred to the vessels of their reflection, i.e. the mirrors themselves.

Gutenberg's venture failed at a time when pandemics were more common than they are now. An outbreak of the plague forced the long-scheduled event to be postponed to 1440, causing a severe cash-flow problem for the business partners (who, back then, had no access to any stimulus programs). Nonetheless, Gutenberg probably gained valuable experience from casting the mirror fittings, one that aided him with his other secret Strasbourg project: merely referred to in contemporary sources as *inventur und kunst*—venture (as in adventure) and art—, it was most likely his new method of casting letters in lead.

On a material level, the casting of mirror fittings and the casting of types were not all that different. Yet even on a conceptual level, both the mirrors held by those fittings and the moveable types share an idea of connectivity. It is intriguing to think of this as the common trait in both of Gutenberg's *aventure*. Roberts is right, of course, when she states that the transmission of images through light is what differentiates photography from printmaking. If one therefore understands letterpress printing as the textual equivalent to the visual communication allowed by prints, perhaps one could also conceive Gutenberg's aura-catching mirrors as a precursor to photography, a medium that would not be invented until 400 years later. The story of the *Pilgerspiegel* could then be added as a preface to the prehistory of photography that Peter Galassi sketched out so brilliantly in his 1981 study *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*.

