





Nina Katchadourian.  
*Talking Popcorn*, 2001.  
 Popcorn machine, laptop  
 computer with custom-  
 written Morse code pro-  
 gram, microphone, speak-  
 ers, plinth, and floor circle.  
 90 x 90 x 72 in. (216 x 216  
 x 172.8 cm). Courtesy of  
 the artist and Debs & Co.  
 Gallery, New York.  
 Copyright © Nina  
 Katchadourian 2001.

The ... uh ... like the uh ... of my ... uh ... this is Houston we're copying ... the uh ... the  
 uh ... the uh ... do uh ... it's a ... we're uh ... uh ... I can see uh ... there uh ... but uh ...  
 o.k. we're ready to uh ... duh ... uh ... uh ... duh ... and uh ... the ... uh ... the uh ...  
 uh ... and uh ...

—Nina Katchadourian, *Indecision on the Moon*<sup>1</sup>

The notion of the extraterrestrial has always been close to the inexpressible and the incomprehensible. Beyond mythologies of lunacy, the technical idea of going out from Earth vividly suggests the problem and the possibility of a foreignness too vast to bridge. Already in the seventeenth century, the English writer Francis Godwin proposed that an extraterrestrial language might be made entirely of melodies, and a few years later in Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage to the Moon*, space

is a place where animals and objects speak for themselves, where language is detached from that which is human.<sup>2</sup> Here, the problem of the extraterrestrial externalizes and allegorizes questions of distance and difference. In the fantasia of Cyrano, space is the perfect linguistic no-place or u-topia.

But times change and utopias do too. And somehow, by the late twentieth century, the gorgeously

baroque fantasy of space flight turned out to be a technical possibility. Somehow it has come to pass that a world public can listen to real spacemen live on air. So what happens to the imagination under the pressure of the literal? In the official version of the story, this union is the very definition of progress: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." And in this light, the event of the first moon landing in 1969 is staged with excruciating precision and broadcast live as testimony to the art of the technological, bureaucratic state.

On radio and television, the experience is amplified by a secondary stagecraft. The CBS television network gives us the politicians, the talking heads, the scientists, the wives, the reporters on the scene—at a "soul festival" in Harlem and on the banks of the Danube in Budapest. It is an opera of self-congratulation. In the TV studio, the announcers themselves begin to sound like antennas channeling voices from the ether ...

Boy, what a day. ... Man on the moon! ... Oh, boy! ... Whew! Boy! ... Boy! ... My golly! ... The way it's gone, they certainly have built our confidence in these machines. ... Neil Armstrong, a 38-year-old American standing on the surface of the moon! ... Oh, thank you television for letting us watch this one! ... Isn't this something! 238,000 miles out there on the moon and we're seeing this. ... Gee, that's good news! ... Oh, boy! ... I sure hope there's no area in this world that's blacked out from television right now. ... There it is, a little U.S. flag on the surface of the moon! ... Look at the powder come up there. ... They're beginning to get pretty frisky up there. ...

President Nixon himself gives definition to the event when he tells Armstrong that they are undoubtedly having the most historic phone call in history. Mission accomplished: speaking human being on the moon.<sup>3</sup>

Few artifacts in our aural history have the immediacy of these first moments of lunar experience, and few seem less subject to decomposition. But this is what Nina Katchadourian explores in her striking sound installation *Indecision on the*

1. Nina Katchadourian, *Indecision on the Moon*, compact disc for darkened room (2001). Twenty-eight minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright Nina Katchadourian, 2001.

2. Francis Godwin, *The Man in the Moone: Or a Discourse of a Voyage Thither* (London: John Norton, 1638); Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, *Histoire comique contenant les états et empires de la Lune* (Paris: C. de Sercy, 1657).

3. 10:56:20 P.M. EDT 7/20/69: *The Historic Conquest of the Moon as Reported to the American People by CBS News over the CBS Television Network* (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1970).

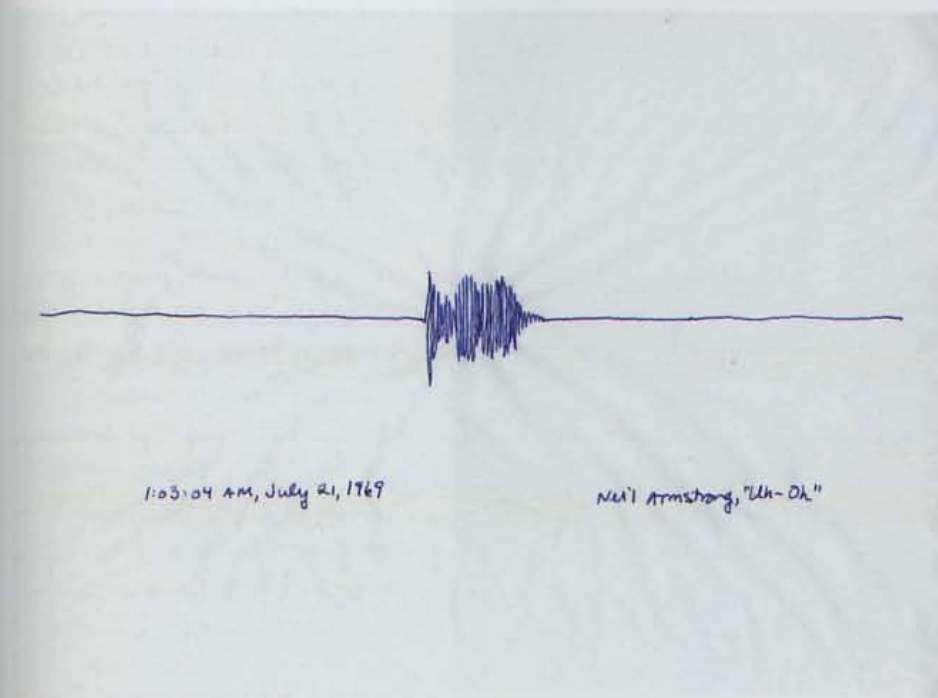


*Austria, 1997.* Dissected  
paper road map. 6 x 3 x  
8 in. (14.4 x 7.2 x 19.2  
cm). Courtesy of the  
artist and Debs & Co.  
Gallery, New York.  
Copyright © Nina  
Katchadourian 1997.





*Uh-Oh*, from the *Indecision on the Moon* drawing series, 2001. Ink on trace. 12 x 19 in. (28.8 x 45.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright © Nina Katchadourian 2001.



Moon (2001). The piece, which is entirely composed of sound, plays in a room darkened to pitch black and screened off like a gauzy maze. Entering *Indecision* is like falling off the edge of the world. Every sound in the piece is extracted directly from the audio of the Apollo 11 moon landing. But in Katchadourian's version of the event, two hours of sound have been cut to 28 minutes, transforming the uncertainties that haunt the recordings into their dominant feature. With perfect fidelity to rhythm and order, Katchadourian has reconstructed a lunar soundscape out of the material of indecision: out of confusion, miscommunication, repetition, ellipsis, interjection, and the many noises, vocal and otherwise, that populate the lunar transmissions. In short, she has faithfully reproduced the lunar broadcast while omitting everything that the broadcasters intended for us to hear, down to and including Armstrong's "immortal" first words.

In *Indecision on the Moon*, the soundscape of Apollo 11 is a mass of fumbled communication and machine noise—weeds among the semantic paving stones.<sup>4</sup> What is strange is that there is nothing mysterious here at all. What's more, we know this jumble intimately—so intimately that it is worth asking whether we were ever really listening for words in the first place, or whether the power of our shared auditory memory of this event

might not rely more on the dense drama of the sonic background than on the thin surface of language in which it is clothed.

In *Indecision*, the story of the lunar lander detaches itself from the history of exploration and conquest and descends toward a much more equivocal history of noise and language. In this history, the key event is not a breakthrough in propulsive power or guidance technology. Rather, the new age dawns when Alexander Graham Bell first successfully stages a long-distance shouting match with his assistant, demonstrating the possibility of nearly limitless transmission of mechanically reproduced noise.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he demonstrates the affective value of combining aspects of noise and language. There is a wealth of sound in his first, distorted, barely audible "Come here," a wealth that translates into distance and time and art. The very act of Bell yelling into a funnel focuses our attention on the acoustic character of language. It marks out utterance as something other than saying, as a material event.

*Indecision on the Moon* illuminates this lineage and this threshold. It begins with speech fragments: a duel between the definite and the indefinite; stabs at possession; broken attempts at comparison; ditto, repetition, and echo. But even before the first sharp noun pierces this phatic bubble, we know exactly what void we're listening to. The static and the staccato are unmistakable: it sounds like 1969 and

4. Michel de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias," trans. by Daniel Rosenberg, *Representations* 56 (Fall 1996), 30; *Remembering Apollo 11: The 30th Anniversary Data Archive CD-ROM, 1969–1999* (Washington, D.C.: NASA History Office, Office of Policy and Plans, NASA Headquarters, 1999).

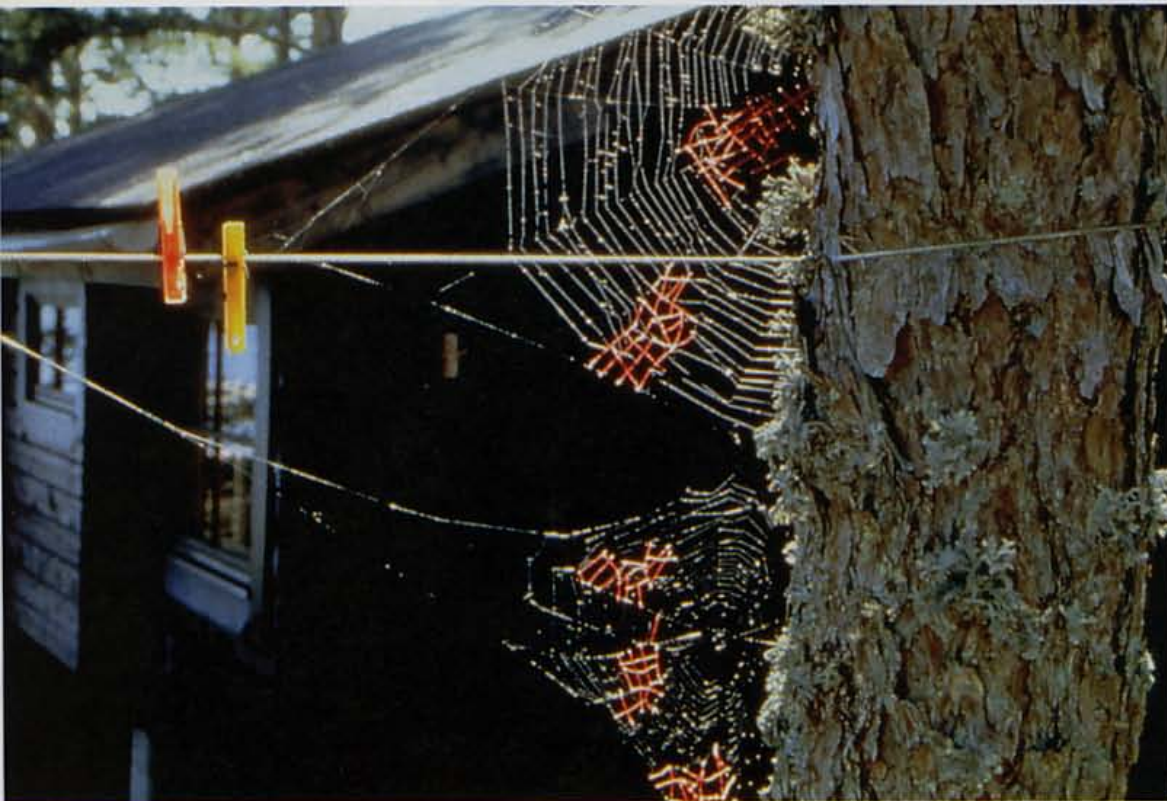
5. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).



just exactly like the moon. From beginning to end, *Indecision* plays on this familiarity. It builds through observation and cut-up. There are things going on up there, but the work resists saying exactly what. In *Indecision*, there are strong elements of abstraction, a decontextualization of the artifact, a balancing of mechanical and human elements, an emphasis on time sequence over narrative. As in the sculptures that Katchadourian has constructed from the material of

road maps and spider webs, here too the force comes not from abstraction itself but from the interrogation of the process by which such abstraction is typically naturalized and overlooked.

For Katchadourian, speech is a peculiar and even secondary species of sound. In another piece, entitled *Talking Popcorn* (2001), she inverts the terms of *Indecision on the Moon*. Here, she has fitted a movie-theater popcorn machine with a micro-processor programmed to interpret its popping as Morse code. The result is a cascade of as-if language collected and marked meticulously by the artist with transcripts and time signatures that resonate strikingly with the Apollo artifacts. This "language"



**Mended Spider Web #19**  
(*Laundry Line*), 1998.  
Cibachrome. 20 x 24 in.  
(48 x 57.6 cm). Courtesy  
of the artist and Debs &  
Co. Gallery, New York.  
Copyright © Nina  
Katchadourian 1998.

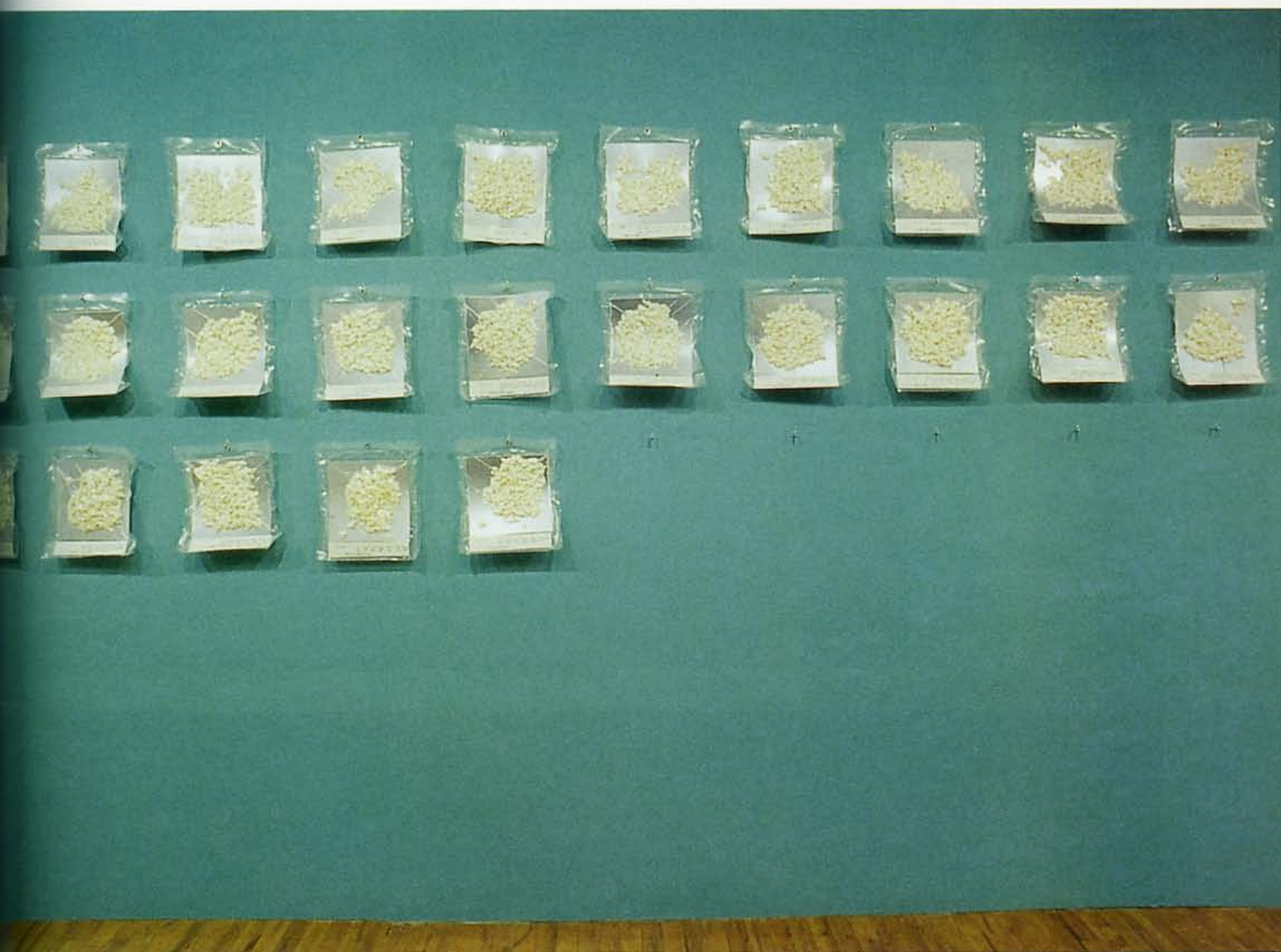
is material in the most literal sense, as Katchadourian suggests in a bronze that she has cast of the machine's first words and by the injunction to eat that channels the coded fragments of popcorn language back through a kind of reverse orality.

In another extraterrestrial piece, Katchadourian has once more asked where meaning inheres. In *Asteroids* (2001) she has magnified photographs of popcorn until they resemble extraterrestrial bodies, bringing us full circle to *Indecision on the Moon* and exposing the literally fragmenting surfaces of her objects.

As Katchadourian suggests, at the moment of lunar landing, noise and language reveal their common cause. But the pull of meaning is powerful. And in moments of narrative overdetermination such as those produced by the governments of the United States and Russia during the Cold War, its appeal is almost irresistible. Among the most remarkable of the sound productions of the 1950s and 1960s was the Soviet satellite Sputnik. Its simple, regular beep elicited from American observers a parallel and equally persistent stream of interpretive discourse. And the sound war didn't end there.<sup>6</sup> In coming years, both the Soviets and the Americans launched human speakers into space. All of these developments culminated in that remarkable moment in 1969 when the United States successfully landed a speaking human being on the surface of the moon.

6. As the CoNET Project has demonstrated in a compilation of recordings of radio transmissions by "numbers stations," for decades intelligence services in the Soviet Union, the United States, and other nations conducted a Cold War in sound, broadcasting endless strings of cipher in the eerie medium of normal voices. In the Conet recordings women, men, and some children read series of apparently random numbers and words as if from storybooks. See *The Conet Project: Recordings of Shortwave Numbers Stations*, compact disc (London: Irdial Discs, 1999).





*Popcorn Journal* (installation shot), 2001. Daily record of the English words spoken by *Talking Popcorn*, one vacuum-packed popcorn bag with paper label for each day, 31 unique works in all. 12 x 12 in. (28.8 x 28.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright © Nina Katchadourian 2001.

*Popcorn Journal*, 2001. Detail. Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright © Nina Katchadourian 2001.



*Asteroid #5*, 2001. Silver gelatin print mounted to aluminum. 30 x 40 in. (72 x 96 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright © Nina Katchadourian 2001.

*Talking Popcorn's First Words*, 2001. Bronze-cast popcorn kernels with plaque in velvet-lined case. 12 x 8 x 3 in. (28.8 x 19.2 x 7.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Debs & Co. Gallery, New York. Copyright © Nina Katchadourian 2001.





This was a great success for America, ranking as high as number 8 on the *Entertainment Weekly* list of the 100 most important moments in broadcast history, above the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, the Watergate hearings, and the debut of the *Mod Squad*, below "Who Shot J. R.?", the first airing of MTV, and the Kennedy assassination.<sup>7</sup> And maybe the ranking is not right, but the continuum is. The lunar landing made great TV—although it wasn't even really TV most of the time. During a crucial hour of descent, the landing module was out of sight of the orbiter and its TV cameras, and there was only audio. TV was reduced (or elevated) to showing a static image of a model lander in some NASA laboratory, while viewers could only listen. But listening was the thing. The whole production of the landing relied on the sound of time and distance. For if words have power, they are nothing without the noise and gaps and vocal accidents. The words only mark the moment, like a caption beneath a photograph. The thing, in the mind's ear, is the mute of Armstrong's voice, the hic and the hesitation. It puzzles out as something between body and technology, between here and there.

As it happens, there was controversy over the audio on Armstrong's return. In the first place, reporters wanted to know whether Armstrong had improvised his famous first words from the moon or whether they had been scripted in advance. (Armstrong said that the words were his own and that they had just come to him in the moment.) This question gave way to another, which Armstrong had more trouble resolving. People assumed that they had understood what Armstrong meant when he first spoke from the moon, but his statement—"One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind"—was actually rather strange. What had the astronaut meant when he said "one small step for man"? Was he *man*? And what was the difference between *man* and *mankind*?

These questions stirred up trouble at NASA, and though the agency maintained that the statement was not pre-scripted, they produced a postscript that differed from the transmission that so many millions had heard. According to NASA, Armstrong's statement had actually been: "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."<sup>8</sup> The new version had the advantage of semantic transparency. But it varied from the audio that people had heard. To clear things up, Armstrong speculated that he had forgotten to say "a."<sup>9</sup> But this must not have sounded exactly right, since NASA came up with a different explanation. According to the space agency, Armstrong had said "a man" all along; the "a" sound had simply gone astray in space. You can hear it on the tapes, they pointed out: there is an "a" missing.

It is difficult to say whether either story is the genuine article. From the point of view of our aural history, both clearly miss the point. Early accounts of the lunar landing sometimes fell in line with NASA's semantic program, inserting the "a" into their transcripts as if it had always been there. But with time, the "a" fell away almost completely and, as in Katchadourian's bronzed popcorn, the moment solidified around the material of the sound itself. In this way, the public voted with its ears. For cultural memory, the *sound* of the moon turned out to be much more important than the *sense*. When we hear the landing, the noise comes first. The words follow after a significant delay.

Daniel Rosenberg is assistant professor of history in the Robert D. Clark Honors College. His work concerns the history of language and epistemology. With Susan Harding, he is editor of the forthcoming collection *Histories of the Future* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

7. "One Hundred Greatest Moments in Television," special issue of *Entertainment Weekly* (January 19, 1999).

8. Andrew Chaikin, *A Man on the Moon: The Voyages of the Apollo Astronauts* (New York: Viking, 1994), 209; Harry Hurt III, *For All Mankind*, interviews by Al Reinert (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), 175–6.

9. Neil Armstrong, interview by Robert Sherrod, September 23, 1971, and Neil Armstrong, Press Conference, Kennedy Space Center, July 16, 1999, [www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/apl1ann/comments.htm](http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/apl1ann/comments.htm)