

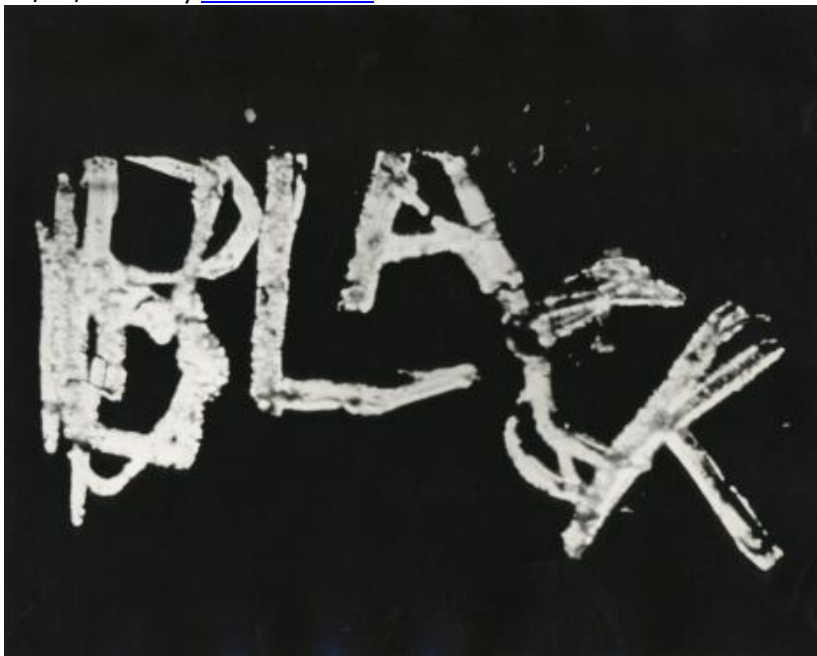
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WAVELENGTHS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALDO TAMBELLINI: GOING BACK AGAIN, FORWARD... SUSPENDED IN SPACE, CIRCULAR FORMS, BROADCASTING SIGNALS INTO SPIRALS

31/03/2014 · by [ameliaishmael](#) · Bookmark the

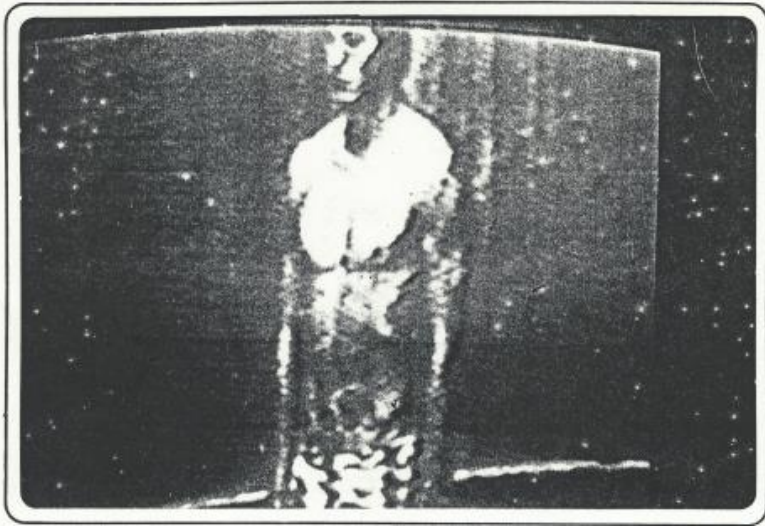


Aldo Tambellini, frame still from "Black Is" film, 1966.

This past fall the experimental artist Aldo Tambellini had two major events in New York City. In September Aldo gave a solo exhibition titled "Aldo Tambellini: We Are The Primitives Of A New Era Paintings and Projections 1961-1989", which was curated by Joe Ketner for the James Cohan Gallery (September 12 – October 19, 2013). And in October Aldo presented "The Black Film Series", a retrospective screening curated by Pia Bolognesi and Giulio Bursi for The Museum of Modern Art (October 18, 2013). I am thankful that the Universe saw it fit for me to be in New York City for both occasions. To experience an impression of Aldo's installation art in person is extremely important—as 2-dimensional photos never do intermedia installations any justice in recreating the physical sensation that the body and senses have when *actually being inside*. Additionally, seeing ten of Aldo's films professionally projected on large cinema screen was fucking intense. It was indeed also a special pleasure to be able to share these experiences with Aldo and his companion (and archivist) Anna Salamone, and so many friends and fans of Aldo's work.

Following is an excerpt of a conversation that I had with Aldo on October 19, 2013.

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Aldo Tambellini, still frame from film "CLONE", 1976.

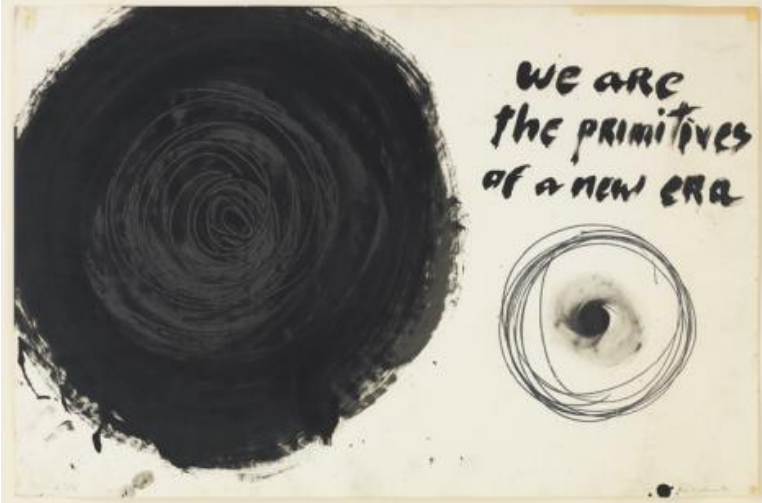
Amelia Ishmael:

I want to start where we left off last year, when we were talking about outer space. Space has seemed to have an integral impact on your work, from the audio track in MoonBlack that we watched last night, with the blast-off count-down. This is included also in the audio track you created for Black Space in the video and sound gallery installation (at James Cohan Gallery), which includes recording from Lift Off Apollo. And also in some of your videos such as CLONE, which included where news broadcast of the Mars landing. What is your fascination with space as a place and concept, and space exploration as an activity?

Aldo Tambellini:

Well, let's put it this way. Number one, I don't believe that in the long run the earth is going to survive. And you ask me about outer space—why I am interested in outer space, which is the correct question, a very correct question. There are many galaxies in the universe, probably millions of galaxies. Now they come out with the idea there's a multiverse: that our universe came from another universe. That's the latest of what the theoretical physicists are believing. Now, if we think of all that, and the Earth is like a looking point in the relation to the galaxy, not only to the universe, there are obviously other living areas, Earth-like planets, in the galaxy. Not only the universe, there are many more in the universe, so I don't believe we're the only ones here. That's the first thing, I don't believe.

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Aldo Tambellini, "We Are the Primitives of a New Era", from the Manifesto Series, 1961, Duco, acrylic, and pencil on paper, 25 x 30 in. (63.5 x 76.2 cm)

Secondly, I think it is the nature of human beings to explore, to find and to communicate. Maybe they are not the same way that we are. But maybe some other intelligent life exists, I hope it is a little more intelligent than ours. I say that we are just beginning. The reason why I say "we are the primitives of a new era" is because, as far as we know—and it could have happened in history, and the documentation got destroyed—maybe we are the first civilization to go out to the moon, to go out of the Earth. When I wrote that on the painting, in the beginning of room with the paintings, there is a painting that has a black circle, and then it has a circle with pencil, my concept of space was already in my brain, at that time. The Russian cosmonaut [Aleksei Leonov](#) went into space—not the moon, he just walked in space—it is something that, as far as we know, no one had ever done before. Can you imagine, just walking in space, and just floating around? That is a new kind of experience. He said that space was so black, that the universe was so black. And I had a quote by him. As a matter of fact, as part of the installation I was going to have quotes by the different astronauts and cosmonauts, and they said maybe you shouldn't tell the critics, you know, you should let them figure it out for themselves. But I had quotes actually for them, and they all talk about space being black. Intensely black. The kind of black they'd never seen before. I was already working in that direction. For me it was very exciting. What I was doing was in the right direction, just intuitively.

Now we're going to backspace now and say, in an issue of *Art Forum* which I'm in, from January of this year [2013], and there is also a review of a show of a woman, which I had never heard of before. She died in 1944, which is the year that I got bombed in Lucca—but I didn't get killed by the airplane, you know because it was wartime in Europe. She has become extremely interesting to me. She did a big huge painting and a smaller painting, most of them with a lot of circular forms. She's having a big exhibit in Berlin right now and her name is [Hilma af Klint](#). And she said that she didn't want people to see her painting until twenty years after her death, because they would not understand what they are doing. She was trained in the Academy in Sweden; she was Swedish. And she was painting landscape, you know, more realistic landscape. And her work didn't become known until many, many years later. And just very recently she's getting a lot of attention, which I'm glad. And if you look at that particular issue of *Art Forum* there is one painting on paper, and a lot of my work is on paper—except some of them were glued on canvas, the gallery did that. There's one painting on paper, not too big, on black, with graphite—and lot of my painting had graphite over black. So that is a very strange coincidence! And she has one painting, which you saw there and could say "that's your painting Aldo", it was done in 1916 by

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her. 1916! It looks exactly like my painting from the 60s! And I have become so interested. She was a very mystic kind of person, and she was involved in some very spiritual things. There was a philosopher, a man from Vienna, who was influencing a lot of people, [Rudolf] Steiner, I think was his name. And I understand that she followed some of the philosophy of this man Steiner. There's a school, I think in New York, of Steiner, and he sounds like a very interesting man. And she was involved with all this kind of philosophy. And there were supposed to be, from what I read recently, five women with her. And one of them painted like mandalas—and I don't do mandalas, but you know my paintings have this circular kind of form. And there was this other writer from *The New York Times*, in the science section, several years ago, and she wrote an article called "The Circular Logic of the Universe" meaning everything which is in outer space is of circular, spherical form. There's no straight lines, in other words, no cubes. And in one of my poems, I mention that—there's no cubes floating everywhere. And in one of the quotations, in one of my poems, I said that when the American astronaut went to the moon, in France Picasso was an older man, and they asked Picasso, "Does this mean anything to you? That they have people on the moon?" And Picasso said, "This means nothing." Because, as great as he was, all of his work is very Earth-bound, mostly of females done in a different kind of ways, or still-lives, or cubistic, and he absolutely never got out of the Earth.



Aldo Tambellini, Installation view "We Are The Primitives Of A New Era" at James Cohan Gallery, 2013 (photographer: Bill Orcutt).

AI:

But your work gets outside of the Earth, quite often.

AT:

Exactly. To me, I'm involved with the concept of a new era, which I share with the astronaut. As a matter of fact, I joined the Planetary Society, which was started by Carl Sagan. They are trying to find out, by listening, if a message is coming from space, because they believe the same thing, And, also, there's a Voyager, Voyager 1, that just got into interstellar space after thirty-five years traveling. It was launched from NASA thirty-five years ago. It just got out of the solar system, the very day there was the opening of Klint's show. Which is another strange coincidence! I didn't know until recently! I wrote a poem to this woman, Klint, this woman who died in 1944, because I feel that there's something to this woman—who I don't know obviously, who only recently came to my attention—in why she was making all of these circular forms. And I understand that she made paintings like eight feet or seven feet high, that she had never shown. Also she had many, many notebooks that were shown with reproductions of some of her work which she calls the Atom Series—not the kind of thing that you do with painting, way back, painting with the concept of the atom. And I should send you some of this poem involved with space, and black. And one of the lines that I wrote says "from invisible made visible." The atom is

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something visible. And I say, it's painting something which is not possible to paint. How do you paint an atom?! So to me she became very interesting, and I want to hear more about this particular artist. Including the fact that she thought no one would understand her work until twenty years later.

Anna Salome:

And that's when Aldo started to paint circles.

AT:

Yeah, yeah that's right. And the painting being from 1916, looking exactly similar without me knowing anything about it, using paper, black and graphite, which I did a lot of. And somehow I felt connected to this person. How could that be? She died the age of 81. And also, she's one of the first abstractionist painters, you know that Kandinsky is considered one of the earliest painters, and Kulpka is another well known artist, and Mondrian was also abstract. And she's considered one of the very, very early abstract painters. And she was studying at an academy, so it wasn't like she was trained in that kind of way. That was a way of thinking. And also, in my background, I was figurative and all that. And I'm very interested, I want to find out, if there are other artists, not the science-fiction kind, but I'm talking about other creative people, who begin to realize that we left the earth a while ago and there is one particular astronaut. I have a book with pictures taken from astronauts outside of the earth and their reactions. They talk like poets, some of these people. They're seeing this from the first time. And one of them says "Now I'm in space and there's no window. There's no edges." I used painting on paper cut in the round. Which is very expensive to do on canvas because they charge a lot. But I did a lot on paper, which I still have.

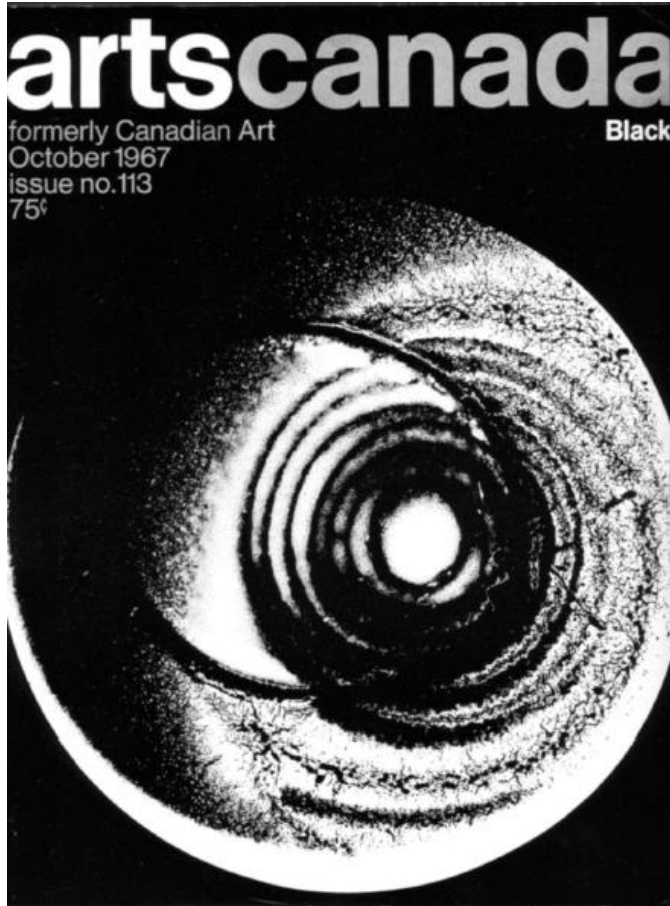
AI:

Can you talk about how working in that way dislocates space. Because, in these works you seem to be embodying what space is and moving into this other dimension.

AT:

You'll notice also, in a lot of the work I do, you feel like I'm suspended. When I paint, sometimes I feel like I'm suspended in space. What I'm saying is that I don't think I'm the only one that can do this kind of work, but I'm touching into a new kind of idea. Other people might express this differently than I do. I remember there was an issue of *Arts Canada*. There was a new editor of *Arts Canada* named Anne Brodsky, and she saw some of my performances in the '60s, in New York. And the first issue that she made, which was like a multimedia issue—a newspaper, a magazine, and a record, inside of a plastic bag. She asked me to participate in this issue, the "Black" issue. On the cover is one of my slides, as a matter of fact. And I went to Toronto in '68, and we had a discussion between New York and Toronto on the issue of Black. Ad Reinhardt—you know, he painted in black—was in it, and Cecil Taylor—the musician—was in it too, he talked about Black, the racial idea. I got also involved with black poets. I was one of the unique artists in the '60s who was doing that, because I'm very against this insanity of treating people differently because of their skin color.

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artscanada. (1967). Cover: Aldo Tambellini's lumagram from hand-painted slide for Black Zero in "Black," artscanada, 113, p. 1.

AI:

You've included footage inside of some your videos that were taken directly from the television—from the moon landing and the Mars landing. Can you describe what that experience was like, to see these broadcasts, and what inspired you to take these excerpts from the television and insert them into your art?

AT:

Well, I never had television at home, because I thought it was disturbing, too powerful. But I used to analyze television, in a bar, or outside, or something, and I became obsessed with analyzing television, like Marshall McLuhan kind of thinking—we're talking about the '60s now. [...] I had the video recorder, and I felt like I could do something with it. That instead of dominating me, I felt like controlling the medium, it was different then from just being there. And there's a room, where the [James Cohan] exhibition is, with two monitors, and that's my first video [Black 1] and the other's my second video [Black 2]. I began to shine lights directly into it. In those days, if you did that, you burn spots in the video chrome, from there on everything had two black spots all of the time—that was my first video. And then I started looking for a place to make a copy of that video.

AI:

What inspired you to experiment and shine the lights directly into the camera?

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AT:

I thought, since television was made out of lights and light was a medium in itself, that instead of using images of people and doing a recording of them, I could do this. All of the lights that you see in the first video are moving.

AI:

How did they move?

AT:

In circular form.

AS:

But, what made them move?

AT:

I made them move.

AI:

So you're moving the lights and shining them into the camera, and they are being recorded live?

AT:

Right. It was improvised.

AI:

Was anyone you know of doing techniques that were similar to this?

AT:

No, I was shining the lights into the camera—which was something you are not supposed to do then.

AI:

And that's what they told you, "you're not supposed to". So you said "Alright. I'll try this!"

AT:

Hehe, right!

Then I was looking for a place to make a copy, because the only copy I had was the reel. And in those days people didn't make copies. Not yet, at that time. It's easier today. And somebody told me there was a place near the airport in New York, I think J. F. Kennedy Airport, and that they could make a copy—because they were making copies of black and white movies and they were putting it in the airplane for people to watch then. They were taking movies and transferring them to video.

AI:

And that was in the '60s? People were already able to watch movies in the airplane during their ride?

AT:

Yes. I think so. The lab that made the copy was called Video Flight. And those people there, they had that lab where they made their copies. They were young engineers, and they became very interested in what I did. It was kind of unusual for them to see. And as they were making the copy I could see on the

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other monitor, where the translation was electronically, different kinds of abstract patterns of my light moving. And that was the second video that is there, at the [James Cohen Gallery] show.

AI:

That's the translation?

AT:

In other words, I was producing those strange patterns—it was my video done with lights. So I said, is it okay if I come back and make a copy, re-shooting the thing, and make another copy. And they got interested in it.

AI:

So you shot a video of their machines copying the original Black 1 video?

AT:

Right. So the two are connected, my first and second videos. And then when I was shooting the video I also took a microphone and I was doing sound, like in an oscilloscope—like an *Ouuouuuuu* sound with the voice as I was watching it. So, it's live. I made the sound for both of them.

AI:

That sound, with your voice, is the sound for both of them?

AT:

Well, some are like electronic sounds, and my voice interfering with the sounds that were electronically made. So the sound was live. And by the way, all of the sound from the film is my sound too. Sometimes, a lot of the young people are like “Oh, you were doing this kind of sound way back?” They seem to like this kind of sound, and it was made in the '60s.

AI:

Except for the count-down and blast-off sounds that you are taking from the television broadcastings.

AT:

Yeah. I still have a lot of reels with this kind of sound. Now, going back again, forward. Around this time I became very interesting in recording what was being made on television, like the riots and the police beating up people, the demonstrations against Vietnam, or of the Civil Rights movements. I ended up having kind of a library of pieces from television news. Which became Black TV, as you can see. Then I would play these tapes back and reshoot them with a Bolex, a 16mm Bolex. And the reason why, was that I was able to select pieces from the news, and re-edit them, and shoot them like five frames at a time, that's how you have the frantic kind of motion and speed. So they went through a lot of different transformations—I recorded the news and then re-shot it with the 16mm. So in a way, *Black TV* is a combination of video, re-shot with film.

AI:

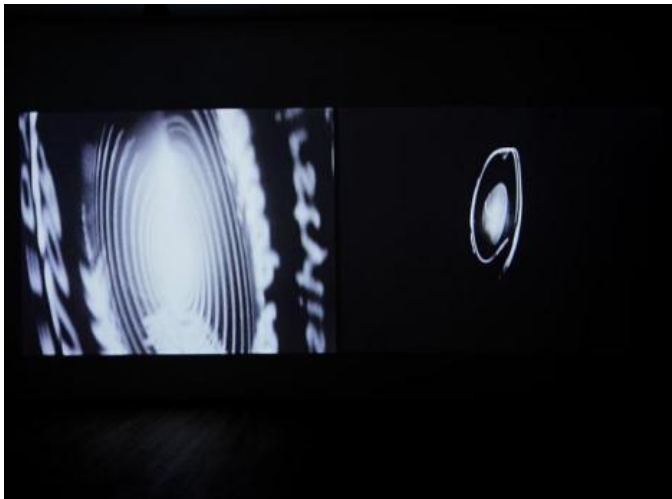
Okay. Um... In some of these videos we see the electronic energy of the cathode tube that is used in the early cameras, and how it translated that beam of light into lines and spirals around the monitor, and we also see the static of the electromagnetic energy, the black fuzz...

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AT:

I was in a show at the Brooklyn Museum. It was a large show, called [“Some More Beginnings”](#) it was organized by Rauschenberg and somebody from the Bell Labs whose name was [Billy Kruger?]. And after that show the media organization called E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) was formed. The show was about all kinds of art and technology. And I had a construction with a monitor, and there was some sound also coming from it, the broadcasts. It was interactive—people could change it and distort the videos and sound. I don’t have that piece anymore.

I met an engineer at that particular show who had worked with some other artists. His name was [Tracy Kinsel?], he was from a laboratory from New Jersey. We got to talking, and I said I was interested in working with an engineer. I said I would like to take the television set and have everything broadcast live—like a regular TV, black and white—and come out in a circular form. He tried. And he had another partner, I think named [Hank Reinbull?], also from laboratory. I went to Bell Laboratory, and it wasn’t working right. So I said, why don’t we make a spiral? And the spiral is what you see on the wall [of the James Cohan Gallery exhibition].



Aldo Tambellini, installation view “We Are The Primitives Of A New Era”, 2013 (photographer: Bill Orcutt)

AI:

With the two spirals?

AT:

Originally it was one spiral, but I made it split-screen. And then I began to film 16mm of what was being made. If you saw the black spiral and people were talking, it would be boring, because nothing changes very much. But, if you shot the commercial with a lot of quick cuts, and you shot it in a few frames per second, and you zoom in and out—in other words shoot with the techniques that I use for film—that’s what you see in the reproduction.

AI:

That’s film then, what we are seeing, rather than video?

AT:

Yeah, and somehow I loaned it to a museum in Syracuse, and I think someone banged it up. It was an old set. The back was very long, and somebody must have banged it against the wall, so it wasn’t working

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anymore. I have it back, and I have to find somebody, an engineer, who is able to make it work again. They call it a television sculpture. It was black and white.

AI:

Ah. Was it video or film, this spiral?

AT:

It wasn't on video, no, no—because I wasn't playing tape at all. I'd just turn it on, and whatever is being broadcast, on whatever station.

AI:

Oh! It actually transformed the regular broadcast signals into spirals? Oh, okay.

AT:

And as I was saying, if it were something like people talking that would be boring, there's no motion and nothing happening, you would just see the spiral. But, when you had a commercial or something, that's why sometimes you see words—then I would shoot a few frames.

AI:

So, the lights that we are seeing in those spirals are actually television images?

AT:

Correct. Yes, yes. Whatever's being broadcast.

AI:

Oh!

AT:

Haha! Right. That what you see. It's another tape being played. And as I said, we'll wait for the commercial, because every time something quickly changes on the screen, and I would shoot a few frames per second. I usually shoot my things very quickly.

AI:

Because with your early video, which you would send light into, sometimes it would make spirals, and I thought Black Spiral was a similar kind of technique. Oh. Wow!

AT:

No, I didn't make *Black Spiral* until much later. And then I had lost my interest in making single tapes.