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We are the Primitives of a New Era. An interview with Aldo Tambellini (Part I)

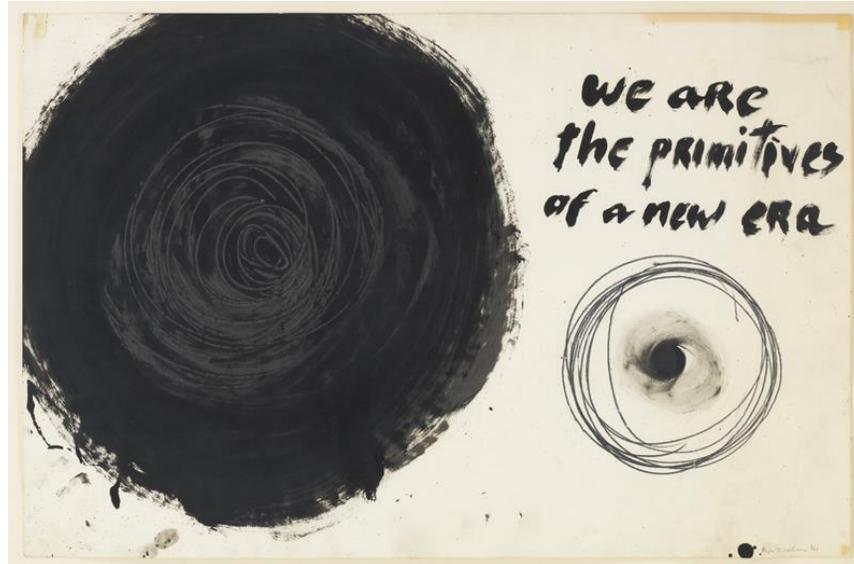


By Ernesto Menéndez-Conde

What is social about art is its immanent movement against society.

Theodor Adorno, *The Aesthetic Theory*, 227.

By August 25, 2012 the spacecraft *Voyager I* left the Solar System, entering in an interstellar space. According to Science magazine, the spacecraft is now 18 billion kilometers away from Earth. It has been wandering across the space for over a quarter of a century, still sending signals, which take several months to arrive to our planet. These signals are weak and hard to decode, but the *Voyager I*'s journey just opened a new Era for Astronautics.



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)
Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York

The spacecraft was launched in 1977. Sixteen years before, in 1961, Italian-Brazilian American artist Aldo Tambellini (b. 1930), wrote over a painting on paper “We Are the Primitives of a New Era.” The painting may look like a late Abstract Expressionist work, if not by this poorly handwritten words, displayed in a manner that rather anticipates the so-called “bad painting” and the anti-aesthetics of the late seventies and early eighties. On the left side of the paper there is a black circle. On the right is a smaller one, drawn with a pencil, with a dark spot inside it. These forms, in their tension, may tell us a little bit about Tambellini’s interest for interstellar space, just few years after the first man-made object orbited the Earth. After meeting Tambellini, I would say these circles also embody his obsession for the unexplored. He is an artist whose work was definitively ahead of his time. Let me briefly mention a few of Tambellini’s artistic experiments which would help to understand his contributions to Contemporary art.

1. In 1963, with *Black*, Aldo Tambellini did a multiple projection in which he took advantage of lights, sound and environment. Here we have a “primitive” version of our contemporary New Media Art.

2. In 1966, the artist started working with videotapes as part of his *Electromedia* presentations (Youngblood, 311)

3. Also in 1966, he co-founded The Gate Theater for showing avant-garde and experimental films. In 1967 Tambellini was aware that the new media demanded the emergence of alternative artistic spaces which were neither the traditional art gallery, nor the theater for screening feature films and co-founded Black Gate Theater, a space for installation and performances with Otto Piene.

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4. In 1968 he did *Black Gate Cologne*, also in collaboration with Otto Piene. *Black Gate Cologne* was the first television broadcast made by artists.

5. In 1969, he started working in the idea of using the TV as an artistic medium. As a result, he did the *TV as a creative Medium* at Howard Wise Gallery, the first gallery show ever done about TV.

6. In 1970, he was in the Vision & Television Show at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Massachusetts, the first museum show of television as an art form in America.



ALDO TAMBELLINI
Black Zero, TATE Tanks, London, 2012
Courtesy: Aldo Tambellini

All these artistic innovations remained overlooked for more than four decades. During the last five years we have been attending to an eventual rediscovery of Tambellini's body of work. In October 2012, Tate Modern presented his performance *Black Zero*, and last September, James Cohan Gallery in New York inaugurated the first Tambellini's solo show in Manhattan since almost four decades. On October 18, MoMA screened a series of his films from 1966 to 1969. These recent events demand to re-write history and help to provide a better understanding of alternative spaces, and alternative artistic projects in the New York art scene of the sixties.

But Tambellini is not merely a widely neglected historical figure who pioneered our contemporary new media art. His work grasped the explosive, romantic and revolutionary spirit of the sixties like perhaps few artists of his generation did it. His attempts to *épater le bourgeois* remain provocative, and are hard to digest even today.

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ALDO TAMBELLINI
We Are The Primitives Of A New Era
Installation view
Photographer: Bill Orcutt
Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York

By the mid-sixties Abstract Expressionism was seemingly exhausted. These were the years of Pop art, and Geometric abstraction, which prevailed everywhere, under the labels of Post-Painterly Abstraction, Hard-Edge, Op-Art, Neo-Concrete Art and Minimalism. This was the artistic scenario in which Tambellini found means for renewing Abstract Expressionism by taking advantage of emerging media. Instead of the large canvases of Pollock, Still, and Newman, Tambellini took Abstract Expressionism to the rather miniature surfaces of the film strip.¹ Many of his films end with the note “This film was made without using the camera.” The celluloid or the magnetic tape became the formats for his “abstract paintings.” Tambellini explored these materials by adding chemicals, inks, pigments, and scraping the surfaces. In his work the boundaries between painting and film become dim.



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These experiments brought new expressive possibilities. What we see on the theater screen is a dizzying sequence of expressionistic gestures, improvised forms, and violent contrasts of lights, to which Tambellini added noises of engines and interferences, as if someone was trying to tune a radio station. The films are uncomfortable to watch. They pose a critique to the *status quo*, as if the artist were shouting “Forget the *Brillo Box* and the End of Art. Forget the idiotic *Yellow Submarine*, and get rid of the flowers in your head. This is our time, as it is, convulsive, provocative and violent.” Tambellini’s performances, films and videos were signed by the refusal to turn subversive ideas into fads. His abstractions show us the violence related to the years of the Civil Right struggles, the Vietnam war, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassinations. His work confirms Adorno’s dictum: “What is socially decisive in artworks is the content that becomes eloquent through the work’s formal structures” (230)

Tambellini’s films frequently begin with a projection of whirling lights, displaying a text that runs in a circular manner. These forms immediately reminded me of Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema*. Was Tambellini quoting him? In any case, the reference to the French artist also works as a negation, since the father of the ready-made would have probably avoided these violent sequences of expressionistic gestures, as well as the political claims, which you can find in Tambellini’s abstractions. Was he challenging the Duchampian Myth? I asked Tambellini about this seemingly contradictory homage/negation of Duchamp’s poetic. Did he try to subvert or criticize him at some point?



ALDO TAMBELLINI
We Are The Primitives Of A New Era
Installation view
Photographer: Bill Orcutt
Courtesy: James Cohan Gallery, New York

Not intentionally, he answered right away, “When I went to Syracuse University, I was twenty years old, and I joined a club where they were showing old cinema, so I became aware of the experimental films. I was aware of Man Ray’s *Le Retour A La Raison*, of Leger’s *Ballet Mechanique* and Bunuel-Dali’s *Le Chien Andalou*, etc., etc. But I never did a critique of these people. These are very important pioneers of Modern art. They brought elements to art that never

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existed before. They broke rules, and introduced new ideas. I respect all these people; I am not critical of them at all.”

Ernesto Menéndez-Conde: The sixties were years of Psychedelia, in which color frequently played a main role. We barely find colors in your work. Why did you choose black and white?

Aldo Tambellini: First of all, all my friends were taking psychedelic drugs and a lot of young kids used to like my work. They saw it as psychedelic, but it wasn't made for psychedelic reasons. When I came to New York in the summer of 1959, I was doing sculptures and simultaneously doing paintings. In the 50s, I was influenced by the figurative French painter Georges Rouault who used a lot of dark colors and black. But I never had a time when I said, “I'm going to paint in black.” It came naturally. I don't work intellectually. I work with intuition, and all my art was done by intuition. I am not an intellectual artist; I am an intuitive artist. There used to be a bar in Saint Mark's Place called The Dom. A man called Stanley owned it, we all knew him, and he wanted me to make a series of slides in color. I made them, but I decided not to give them to him because I didn't want to work with color.

EM: Why do you feel more confident by not using color?

AT: It is very hard to explain. In a way, by not using colors, it creates a different way to work. I got more and more interested in space, in other words, the blackness of it. In 1965, I believe, a cosmonaut from Russia, Alexei Leonov, went into space and made a tremendous statement. He said: “Before me – blackness: an inky-black sky studded with stars that glowed but did not twinkle; they seemed immobilized. Nor did the sun look the same as when seen from Earth. It had no aureole or corona; it resembled a huge incandescent disc that seemed embedded in the velvet black of the sky from outer space. Space itself appears as a bottomless pit. It will never be possible to see the cosmos the same way on Earth.” I was very excited because he was saying something I was already involved with. But I never had science. I went to an art school when I was 10 years old in Italy, from morning to late afternoon. I was born an artist.

(to read Part II of this interview go to [this link](#))

NOTES

¹ “Aldo did his first video in 1966 by shining light directly into the lens of a porta-pak (which was the old video cameras used with a stationary console that held a 1/2 inch tape reel to reel) the portable portapak came out in 1967,” wrote me Tambellini's partner, Anna Salamone, in an email exchange.

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