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



By Ernesto Menéndez-Conde

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

Ernesto Menéndez-Conde: How did you switch from Abstract art painting to video art?

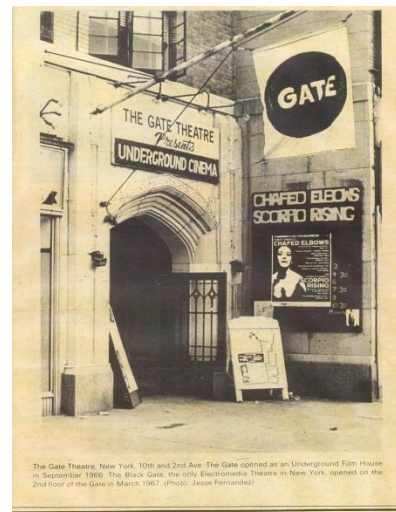
Aldo Tambellini: Well, I never had television at home. Not in those days, because I thought it was a too powerful of a medium but I used to analyze and be aware of its power. I was very aware of the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, when he was talking about media as an extension of human senses, so I was into media intellectually. My companion, named Elsa, and I did a lot of things together in the sixties in New York and later we opened a movie theater, The Gate, where we showed experimental films. I bought a television and a non-portable reel-to-reel recorder and a video camera, and immediately I began recording. I felt like I could take control of something not available to me before. I began to shine lights directly into the camera burning black spots on the vidicom and created my first video, *Black Video 1*. I wanted to make a copy of that particular video, but at that time nobody was making copies of videos. So, somebody told me there was a place near the airport, called Video Flight, and they used to copy the movies in

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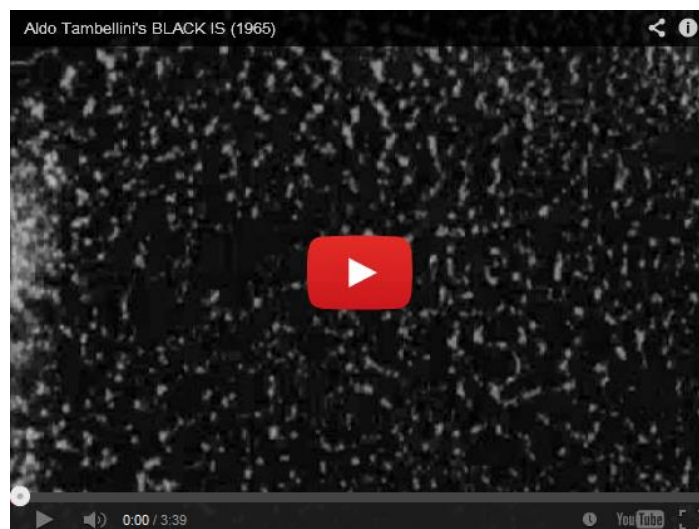
videos to show them on airplanes. They were all young engineers, and they were very interested in what I was doing. As they were copying my video, I saw all kinds of electronic patterns on the monitor and I decided to come back and start videotaping the images manipulating them with electronic equipment improvising a sound track sometimes creating strange sounds with my own voice. That became my second video, *Black Video 2*. That's how I began my involvement with video. I was already doing films, but to me video was different. With film you go through a process of developing before you see the result. With video the result is instant. Soon, for so many, video became a way to make easy art.

EM: How did you distribute your films? Where did you show them?

AT: My films got around quite a bit; with Elsa, we had our own movie theater in the Lower East Side, on 2nd Avenue and 10th Street, the Gate Theater. We used to have a program seven days a week. The program was an hour a half, it was a compilation of underground films. We charged a dollar and a half. Sometimes I used to show my films which were very short. One time I sat in the audience. I was watching one of our programs and when it came to my film, there was a man next to me, who I didn't know, and he thought my film was "awful" he said, "terrible." He covered his eyes, asking me "Is this still going on?", and I said "I am sorry, it is still going on,"- I didn't tell him it was mine- and at the end I told him it was over and he said "Oh, thank God." Then somebody came to me and said "Aldo, there is a woman looking for you." I met this woman, and she said, "Your movie was terrific. I have a friend who is almost blind, and he would love to see it". So I said, "I am making movies for the blind!" If someone doesn't like my work, it doesn't bother me.

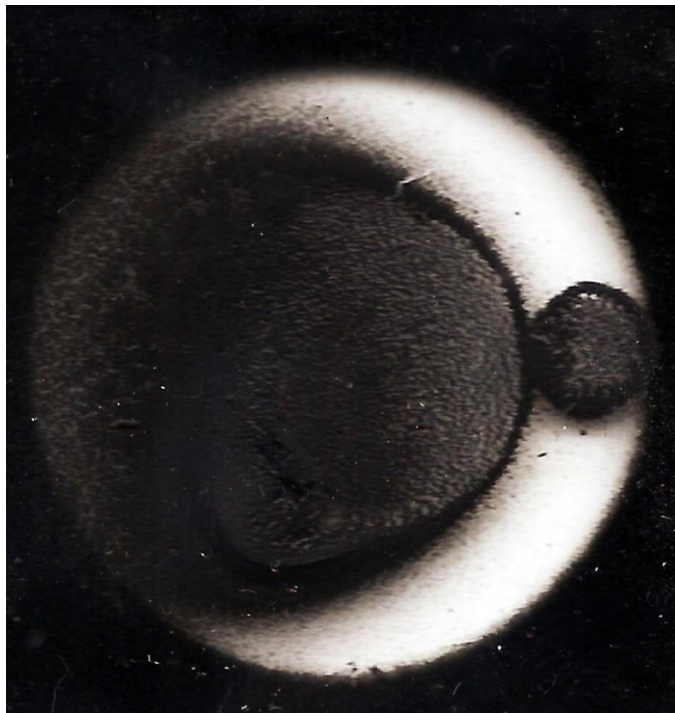


The Gate Theater Outside



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I used to also do a lot of performances. There was a group of black poets I met meeting on 2nd street, near Avenue C. One of them I knew from Syracuse University- we went to college together. They were making a magazine called *Umbra*, you know “the shadow”. Of course, they were political; it was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. I did my first performances with two of them. Their poetry and my projections of hand-painted slides (*lumagrams*), became my first performance presented at International House at Columbia University; it was called *Black*. I made a poster, which I still have. I continued doing performances, so what we called *Black*, became a work in progress. At the end it was called *Black Zero*. I performed it around in different places, including Princeton University. The last time *Black Zero* was performed was at the Brooklyn Academy of Music part of the Festival, *Intermedia 68*. Just recently, in 2009 it was performed at the Festival, *Performa 09*. *Black Zero* was presented at the inauguration of the Tanks at the TATE Modern in London in 2012.



ALDO TAMBELLINI
Lumagram 1
Courtesy: Aldo Tambellini

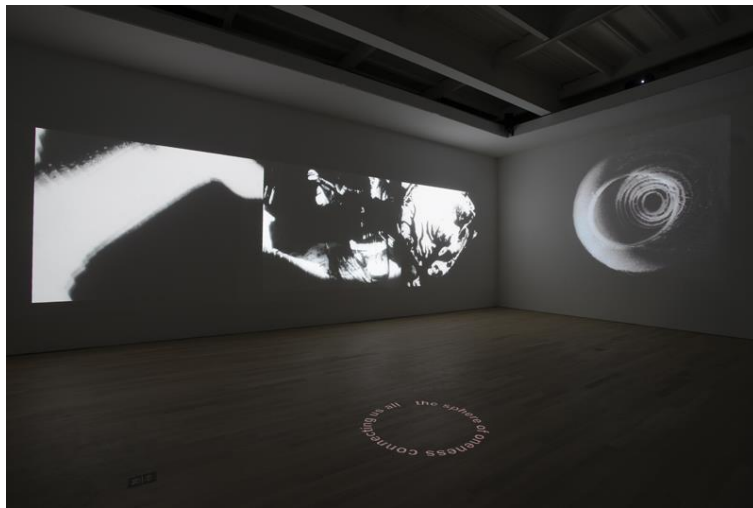
EM: You went back to painting?

AT: No, not when I was at MIT at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. When I became a Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1978, I was more interested in communication. Not video as art, but video as interactive communication. MIT was a fertile environment where interactive collaborative ideas could be actualized. In 1980, I began *Communicationsphere*, “a network to develop channels among artists, technician, engineers and performers and all concerned with the impact of tele-communications on contemporary society.” Technology and culture are interrelated from an industrial-electronic society we are moving to a communications-information society –

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telecommunications brings the world screen to screen and we become one with the new perception of the world –the electromagnetic spectrum is to be considered a natural resource for creative activity. Transmitted information is the new form of art – this is the age of mass media & technology – this is the age of satellite and instant global communications this is the age of networks – the age of interactive media. *Communicationsphere* is the new environment connecting us to a new exploration and definition of the universe and its interpretation by artists.

Some of the inter-active communication activities which we used to do involved a piece of equipment which is obsolete today, called Slow Scan. It was connected to the telephone. It's like am- television. If you have somebody in another city or country, and he has the same equipment, you can exchange images and interact. Then you begin to transmit from your video camera into this box, and you see it transmitted line-by-line, coming down into the monitor, what you are sending to him and he is sending you, I did a lot of that when I was at MIT/CAVS. I used to have students (at MIT), and we did a slow scan activity once with Tokyo, Vienna, New York, San Francisco and Canada. It was called *Artists and Telecommunication*. The project was organized by the Museum of San Francisco. So that particular day, at a particular hour they with slow scan transmitters and computers we interacted and exchanged images. I have a video tape of that. Other communications were later done with Austria, Australia, Indiana, Canada and many other locations. It is my belief that one day we would be able to communicate and interact with other forms of life in this vast Universe.



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

EM: In one of your videos you wrote “The Void”, what does this concept have to do with your work?

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AT: Well, I never studied science, but I am interested in science, in particular when it relates to the Universe, because we are part of a vast Universe. We are in a galaxy, a large spiral. There are many, many stars, which are either too close, or too far from Earth, but there must be some place, where there is a similarity to our planet Earth. I say something must exist, maybe not in the same sense of how we are but there must be life elsewhere. I belong to an organization called The Planetary Society, which was started by Carl Sagan. They are trying to see if they can communicate with other forms of life. I am an old guy; I will not live too long, but I say: If we understood the Earth, there must be something that will be discovered, maybe a life form different from us, but there is no reason why the Earth should be the only livable planet, although we are destroying it. Look what happened in Japan with the explosion, all the petroleum that has gone into the Ocean. Little by little we are destroying the environment, so there must be some life in other places. I consider astronauts the primitive people of the future. Now scientists tell us that life on Earth may have come from another universe. A group of scientists, believe that we are in a multiverse, in other words, in more than one universe. I think that before the Big Bang there was another universe. There are black holes, the ones which swallow the stars. The whole Universe is alive with different things that flow and change; 75 percent of the Universe is black matter and black energy. This is more or less my kind of thinking. This is what we are beginning to realize, because nobody went into the space before, unless there was a lost civilization that did it, but as far as we know nobody landed on the Moon before, and the Moon is so close to us! That's why you find a lot of black spaces, and black holes in my work.

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