

# Social Signals

INA BLOM ON ALDO TAMBELLINI AT TATE MODERN

**THE CHOICE OF VENUE** could not have been more perfect. The huge, unlit, cylindrical spaces of the Tate Tanks seem to call for an artist whose preferred shape is the circle and whose key motif is darkness or, to be more precise, blackness, in all its forms and with all its connotations. Neither white cubes nor black boxes, the Tanks project a spirit of “activity” that is equally apposite here: Aldo Tambellini has been a media artist since the early 1960s, and his use of video, film, and slide projections has always been about environmental manipulations and sensorial onslaught, not about presentation per se. His work is concerned with physical forces, not images. But those physical forces are deployed in ways that open onto questions of *social* forces. Ultimately, his artistic strategy is one that works to expose a troubling ethics of the image and of imagining or picturing as a social act. To experience Tambellini’s “Retracing Black”—a six-day-long restaging of key works from his “Black Film Series,” 1965–69, and “Black Video Series” 1966–70, alongside slide projections and dense washes of electronic sound—was to be projected back to a mode of thinking that informed much artistic deployment of film and video in the ’60s and early ’70s, one in which exposure to the velocities and materialities of new technologies seemed to spur the invention of new social visions.

Yet in the context of media art, Tambellini’s activities gained momentum through a deeply counterintuitive move. The fact that video, film, and photography are generally understood as technologies of light—associated with modern illuminated environments and the steady quest for enhanced visibility—did not stop him from

suggesting that darkness, i.e., blackness, is a more fundamental and thus more critically valid point of departure for a project where the domain of the visible comes under scrutiny. And with this suggestion—which extends from his early enamel paintings of circular black forms, through all manner of destructions and perforations of painterly surfaces, to the use of film, photography, and video—a whole ontology of light is displaced. In this ontology, light figures as the physical and metaphoric grounding of human cognition, the premise of our ability to survey territories, to recognize, distinguish, memorize, and represent. While sunlight supports the normal working of the human eye, the technological accessing of long-unperceived sections of the electromagnetic spectrum radically expanded the range and concept of visibility. Hence the centrality of the term *electromagnetic spectrum* for 1960s artists, preoccupied as they were with the aesthetic and artistic implications of a transformation of vision that seemed to produce not just new electronic bodies but new ways of knowing and thinking.

From this perspective, it is striking that one of the true pioneers of video has seemed to base his entire production on a rejection of the centrality of light. In “Retracing Black,” everything revolved around darkness: What little light there was seemed to emerge from within black space and to be sucked back into that space before any impressions had time to form. A triple-screen film projection showed rapid-fire sequences of a huge variety of circular shapes interspersed with stretches of celluloid that had been scratched, painted, burned, and exposed; interpolated into this material were various types of home-movie documents and

found footage, mainly evoking urban scenes and media-related materials. Nothing was offered for meditation—everything was subjected to a form of flickering that came across as the permutations and accidents of darkness rather than the “play of light” of avant-garde media experimentation. Slide projections on the walls and floor allowed a variety of rounded, cell-like forms to emerge, only to fade to black as soon as you focused on them.

In fact, it was as if everything, including the hand-painted slides that form the basis of the projections, had been produced and was being presented at the

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“speed” of video. For in this context, video was above all a technology that made it possible to access a realm of speeds and frequencies beyond the capabilities of the human eye and at odds with the general appeal to visibility in art—as demonstrated on constellations of monitors dispersed on the floor. One of Tambellini’s early achievements was his efficient undoing of the very notion of the televisual “image”—an image often produced by an accretive process of left-to-right scanning that, although imperceptible, has obvious parallels with the way the eye reads a page of text in Western culture. Manipulating the internal circuits of the set, he was able to produce spiraling forms that emphasize TV as a medium in which the image is simply a function of one specific set of controls—one that just happens to be more rigidly enforced than others, thanks to the decisions of manufacturers and standards boards. The speed of signals, not the legible image, is the fundamental fact of television. And in “Black Video Series,” the rapid emergence and disappearance of circular forms,

From left: View of “Aldo Tambellini: Retracing Black,” 2012, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London. Photo: Lucy Dawkins. Projections from Aldo Tambellini’s “Cell Series,” 1962–68, handpainted glass slides transferred to 35 mm. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.





Clockwise from left: Aldo Tambellini, *Black Spiral*, 1969, 16-mm reversal, black-and-white, sound, 6 minutes. Aldo Tambellini, *Black TV*, 1968, 16 mm. From "Black Film Series," 1965–69. Aldo Tambellini, *Black Video 2*, 1966, video, black-and-white, sound, 28 minutes. From "Black Video Series," 1966–70.

televisual outtakes, and general electronic noise seem explicitly to attest to the forces of frequencies—wild powers at work, as liable to tear through the darkness with thumping, piercing sound as with blinding flashes of light.

Tambellini was not entirely alone in his quest for a "black media" ontology. His emphasis on material forces rather than pictorial forms had a correlate in the work of his friend and sometime collaborator Group Zero cofounder Otto Piene, whose own preoccupation with perforated surfaces and media-generated circular forms was related to the idea of a "proliferation of the sun"—itself a quiet displacement of a homogeneous ontology of light. And in a late text titled "*Melanographie*" (1968), Dada artist and prototelevisual experimenter Raoul Hausmann expounded a theory of photography that was even closer to Tambellini's concerns. For Hausmann located the generative, productive moment of photography not in its famous "writing with light" but in its automatic and uncontrollable production of black shadows: Here was an active instance of difference *within* the photographic image that would forever prohibit its stabilization.

However, Tambellini was pretty much alone in directly connecting his black-media ontology to the social and political upheavals of the '60s, most notably the civil rights movement and a concomitant cultural impulse: the reclamation of blackness both as an identity to be celebrated and as a positive aesthetic term. Living on New York's Lower East Side, he worked closely with a group of black poets associated with *Umbra* magazine: The voice and words of its editor, Calvin Hernton, featured prominently in the sound materials of "Retracing Black." And when human faces

flicker past in Tambellini's films and videos, they are, more often than not, African-American faces shot in stark, high-contrast black-and-white that allows facial features to get lost in an expanding realm of darkness, as if in a head-on refutation of the supposed "problem" of photographing black skin. Through such formal gestures, Tambellini could indicate other ways of imagining a social world. In fact, this is precisely where Tambellini's strategic foregrounding of darkness as a marginalized zone of nonknowledge gets its political edge. To be white is to have visibility, and to be seen is to be known: Such is the self-assured perceptual/social operation that has delimited and protected its realm so effectively and for so long. Tambellini's exposition of the very logic of racism may have traits in common with the key argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon's famous critique of the way in which blackness was (negatively) defined in relation to white identity and white culture—a relation so entrenched, Fanon asserted, that it had come to structure black subjectivity itself. For someone working on the question of visibility and light, it might seem that a possible antidote to this division and stratification of the social field would be a less overweening view of the reach and grasp of human vision, even in its most technologically enhanced states. The association between blackness and signal speed is key here, for it is through this gesture that blackness and darkness escape being pinned down as a quality or identity locked in a static, formalist relation to white and light. For Tambellini, blackness was a mobile condition with multiple registers, and one of these was as a figure of *de*-essentialization and suspension in which signals (for example, the socially constructed signals that produce race) can never rigidly cohere into image.

The late '60s and early '70s saw the first scraps of evidence of the existence of dark matter, to cite the scientific name given to an as-yet-undetermined type of matter that neither emits nor absorbs electromagnetic radiation—its existence only inferred by its gravitational effects—yet is apparently responsible for 84 percent of matter in the universe. The beloved electromagnetic spectrum of the early video artists—at times seen as a portent of a newly expanded "cosmic" consciousness—could in other words also come to represent the severe limitations of the human senses, as exposed by Tambellini's displacement of a dominant ontology of visibility. Acknowledging difference in the social field necessarily implies accepting the existence of an unknown and perhaps unknowable quotient. Tambellini's technology-driven interest in the larger field of physics and space research may have led him toward intuitions that resonate in recent artistic explorations of a world beyond light. One example is the publication of *A Ray of Darkness*, a collection of meditations on astrophysics that serves as a teaser for the "Dark Universe" theme of this year's Sonic Acts festival in Amsterdam: Running through this publication is a concern with the way in which dark matter and energy function as a powerful cultural imaginary for art, since encounters with a radically nonhuman world also affect our perspectives on human affairs. Clearly, such concerns underpinned Tambellini's effort to politicize the general celebration of light media. Turning their luminosity inside out, he validated the positive force of the unknown—not as a mystical entity but as an all-important element in concrete social and political struggles. □

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