

# MATTER MINDING, OR WHAT THE WORK WANTS: ALDO TAMBELLINI'S INTERMEDIA

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Black to me is like a beginning. A beginning of what it wants to be rather than what it does not want to be.

– Aldo Tambellini<sup>1</sup>

My steps quicken as I register the clattering sound of a film projector. This museum hosted me uncountable times during weekly visits from an adjacent London neighbourhood. But today seems different. After a brief check in, I find myself hastening to a dark space from which intermittent light emanates to a rhythmic soundtrack of a heartbeat. This feels familiar. I encounter an array of predominantly analogue media exposed in a dark space – film, television, video, projections, glass slides, paintings and drawings – echoing, on different registers, the work of Group Zero, Otto Piene's elegant kinetic light environments, and Fluxus's Structural Film experiments, but as if filtered through a considerably darker lens – an exuberant theatre of electronic media I feel excitedly drawn to. The wall text assures me that these works have been created by Aldo Tambellini, a master of manipulated darkness.<sup>2</sup> After a prolonged contemplation, seeing becomes enhanced by the hearing of an eclectic soundscape: a rattling analogue film projector situated prominently at eye level and the more discrete yet pervasive noise of digital beamers affixed to the ceiling join the biological sound of the heartbeat. The further olfactory sense enhances the experience: the fragrant effect of the projectors' warmth-producing electronic labour and the lamp-warmed celluloid. All surfaces emanate blackness. But it also seems that, just as in blackness, these objects are intrinsically grounded in the material affordances of their carriers. The glass slides have been exposed to a manual manipulation; the film seems to carry traces of a physical engagement with the celluloid; the film shown on the CTR monitor exposes the inner dynamics of the recording apparatus. As I soon find out, none of these artworks represent reality. Rather, they *create* and *are* reality.

American-Italian multimedia artist Aldo Tambellini (1930–2020) has long flown under the art world's radar, known to a small circle of *appassionatos* of experimental film and early electronic media. Starting as a painter and sculptor in the late 1940s, it is only in the late 1960s that he developed experiments with electronic media and film. His filmic rendez-vous began through direct treatment of film as a material to be manually altered – scratched, painted and drawn upon – affecting images recorded on a 16mm film camera that he acquired from a friend. The staggering range of his media includes abstract drawings, sound, poetry and electronic arts such as television and video (the latter a natural step shared with other artists at that time to explore immediacy). In *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood differentiates these as 'synaesthetic videotapes, videographic films, and closed-circuit teledynamic environments'.<sup>3</sup> Tambellini's 'electromedia', as the artists used to call them, were created side by side with Nam June Paik, a Korean American artist whose pioneering role in the development of early electronic art has been, unlike Tambellini's, widely acknowledged in historical narratives. As noted above Tambellini was appreciated in 1960–70s experimental art circles. This was

Previous page: Aldo Tambellini, *Fire and Ice Lumagrams*, 1965–68, set of eight digital scans of hand-painted glass slides, open edition, 12,7 x 5 cm.  
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due largely to his having taken part in the two seminal exhibitions: 'TV as a Creative Medium' and 'Vision & Television', and having participated with his artwork *Black* in 1969 in 'The Medium Is the Medium', a ground-breaking programme on the Boston TV channel WGBH that featured video art.<sup>4</sup> Tambellini's artistic activities included running the Gate Theatre on Second Avenue in the Lower East Side, an avant-garde cinematheque showing underground and experimental films, including his own, and those by Stan Brakhage, Jack Smith, Theatre of the Ridiculous and Paik. Above this space, together with his friend and Group Zero artist Otto Piene, Tambellini founded the Black Gate Theater, a venue devoted to electromedia.<sup>5</sup> Shows included multi- and electronic-media environments, performances, installations and screenings by Yayoi Kusama, Paik and Piene among many others. Artists and film-makers Stan VanDerBeek, Smith, Brakhage, Kenneth Anger and George Kuchar, many of whom later joined the ranks of the canonised avant-garde, belonged to Tambellini's artistic circles.<sup>6</sup> After accepting Piene's invitation to become a fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT in 1978, Tambellini developed interests in satellite communication and devoted himself to leftist poetry. In the following decades, however, he almost entirely disappeared from the art world. This is largely considered a result of his opposition to the art establishment and his involvement in political activism, aided by the fact that many of his paintings and works on paper significant to the genealogy of his lumagrams and videograms have been long considered lost.<sup>7</sup>

Since the 2000s Tambellini's work has been revisited with major institutions interested to acquire and present electronic and time-based media and performance. The restaging of his electronic media work *Black Zero* at Performa 09 was followed by major exhibitions at Chelsea Museum in New York (2011), Tate Modern (Tate Tanks, 2012), James Cohan Gallery (2013) and the ZKM: Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe (2017); in 2010 the Harvard Film Archive created an important reference collection of his restored prints.<sup>8</sup>

Black, and blackness, are Tambellini's most recognisable, politically charged subjects or tropes that run through a 60-year 'chronology of obsession', as one critic put it.<sup>9</sup> His works combine black ontology and blackness as a racial connotation – that is, they reclaim blackness, notes art historian Ina Blom, as an identity to be celebrated.<sup>10</sup> For the artist, 'black is the beginning ... it is the womb and the cosmos ... it is birth, the oneness of all, the expansion of consciousness in all directions'.<sup>11</sup> From darkness, God conjures light in the opening passages of *Genesis*. Darkness's fecundity adjures dreams. But in Tambellini's work, black posits a beginning of self-directed agential activity that not only grants his works an urgent immediacy but, above all, allows for an unprecedented *mediality* (the emphasis of the means of mediation) and *intermediality*. In 1966, Dick Higgins defined the intermedial work as something that falls between and outside the established media categories, thereby opening up alternative ways of operating beyond what fixed concepts of media enabled.<sup>12</sup> Tambellini's manipulated films are both motion pictures and canvas-like surfaces to paint and scratch upon; once the film runs on a projector, it creates an immersive multimedia performance in which the technological and the biological body participate. Further along the intermedial lines, Tambellini's poems unite pictorial aspects with the written word and the sounds of their physical actualisation; his lumagrams

combine the tradition of reverse glass painting (*Hinterglasmalerei*) with the principle of the magic lantern (*laterna magica*), sounding out a biographical tone – it was the artist's mother that introduced him to this technology.

Little can be grasped beyond the olfactory, audible and haptic that transform the experience of his works' materiality into an expanded, if not synaesthetic multimedia environment in which the performers – both artwork and beholder – are engulfed in blackness. A decision to use just one non-chromatic colour is all but purist: black reveals the manifold potentiality of form, texture, sound and light generated by these media; it grants the elevated perceptual awareness a possibility to tap into the darkness with many beginnings and multiple ends. Of course, Tambellini is also a child of his epoch: the space race accompanied by the first images of the Earth that reached humans from the orbit thanks to the first manned space travel of Yuri Gagarin in 1961 and the moon landing of Neil Amstrong in 1969. The images not only held the promise of technological progress, but also recorded the inscrutable blackness of dark matter and infiltrated the temporal and spatial consciousness of the decade.

Black liberates us from Western culture's distaste for colour evidenced in the work of classical writers. If colour – according to an admittedly dated argument – is a distraction from line and form, black liberates. In that vein, Protestant intellectual simplicity and humility have been expressed in black and white. Without the distraction of colour given emphasis by designers and architects – e.g. Henry Ford and Le Corbusier – a true and durable form comes to the fore.<sup>13</sup> The exuberance of black and blackness that consistently marks Tambellini's abstractions, rough spiral sketches and stroboscopic ruptures, evokes almost an ancestral spiritualism that transcends any desire for a defined form. It is in this unfolding electronic spectacle that materiality finds itself, again and again, vital to the effects that it produces.

Materiality is the *élan vital* in, behind and of these media. Moreover, no representation is involved, no 'depicting' or 'abstracting' reality through their implements. Instead we are always thrown back to blackness, paradoxically via technologies of light. The physicality of Tambellini's media underpins virtually all of his works as an inherent aesthetic and material trope. As the experimental films created by his contemporaries such as Brakhage, Robert Breer and equally exciting albeit absent from the historical narrative Polish artist Julian Antonisz, Tambellini's cameraless and non-narrative films, explore techniques that include collaging, cutting, scratching and painting directly onto celluloid. If one second of a film usually adopts the standard 24 frames, the creative moment of a 4min film such as *Black Is* (1965) extends to 5760 frames offered through the artist's manipulation. Such a possibility reinscribes the human hand into a field of machines and celebrates the tactile experience of making.<sup>14</sup> Tambellini exploits the amenability of celluloid to manipulation to achieve a non-narrative, dynamic composition that he then plays back on a projector. The visual experience – the pace of the changing, at times stroboscopic, optical sensations – is complemented by the sound of a film projector. Even though screenings usually deploy an exhibition copy, the knowledge of the film's slow but inevitable self-destruction in the projector's mechanics that are supposed to bring film to light extends the creative act: the materiality of

the filmic work unfolds well beyond the authorial moment, into the process of decomposition, ageing, and wear and tear intrinsic to the filmic medium's analogue nature.

Similarly, Tambellini interacts with the surface of the glass slides by applying black paint and subsequently scratching and/or manipulating them chemically.<sup>15</sup> The story has it that while projecting these slides onto a house façade, Tambellini noticed a similarity with his paintings. Lumagrams' principle was not only an expansion of the aesthetic and material possibility of painting but also an exploration of a self-referential quality in which the physis of the medium becomes what we see. Exempted from the destructive potential of a playback device, the glass slides have been recently presented in a backlit vitrine. One must look twice: recalling nothing more than historical microscopic specimens (a similar, delightful display might be found in the University College London Grant Museum of Zoology), and becoming nothing less than sterile objects of visual appreciation, they await, and already symbolise, a deactivated future in a museum vault. No doubt, caring for an artwork requires caring for its material structure. This raises questions because materials, by their very nature, change. In a perpetual paradox of conservation, are we saving the work by depriving it of its vitality or are we destroying it? If the work, however, 'happens' in our multisensory experiential engagement, is distilling a material substrate out of the whole dynamic composite – the real work – and sealing it in a hermetic environment, not an attempt to reduce it to a prop?

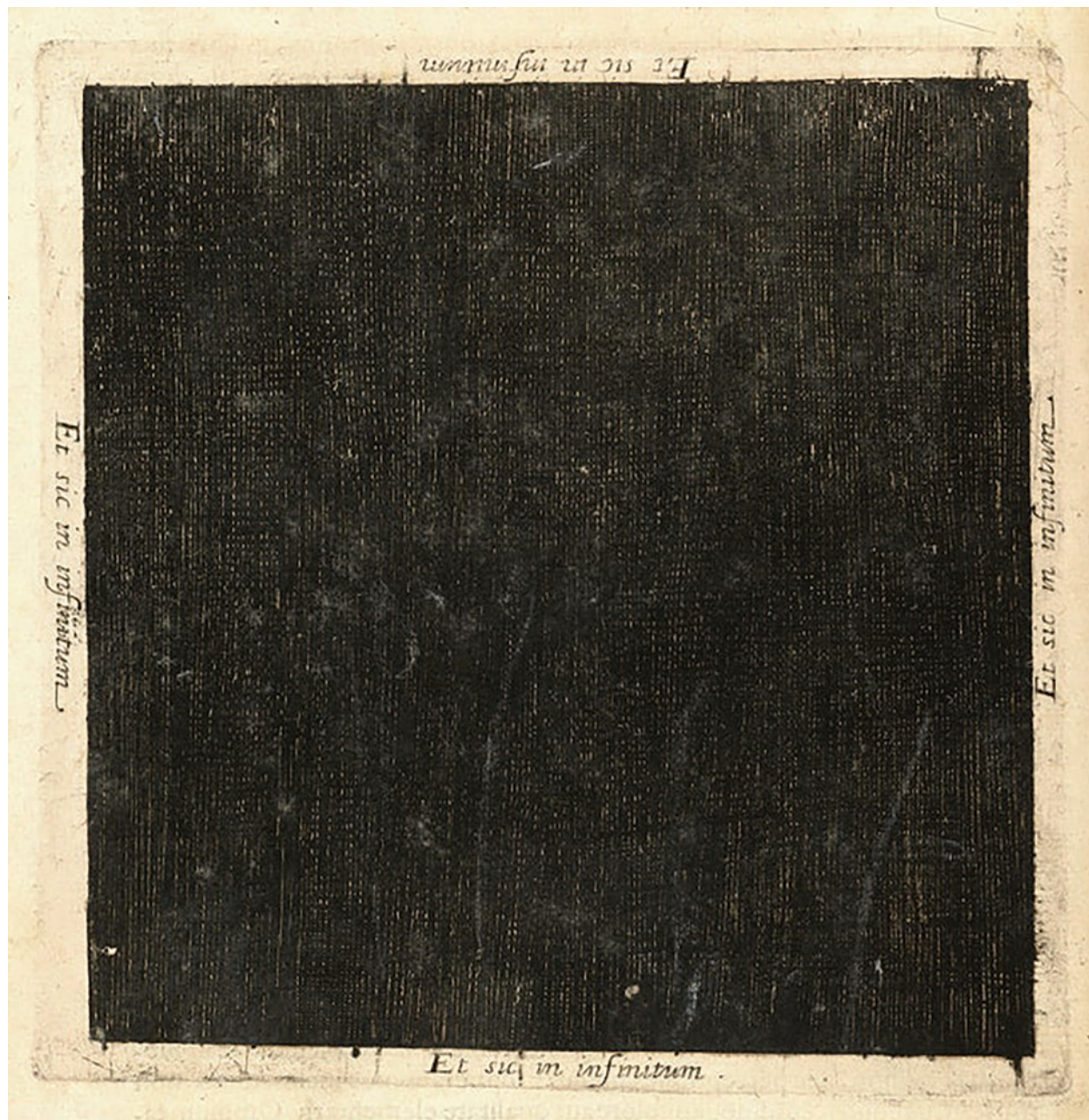
Tambellini's interests in the medium's physical properties and its inherent aesthetic and material quality might also be found in his video works, as can be seen in his recording of a stream of light shone directly into the camera. But a more telling example of self-referentiality occurs in another of his inventions: videograms. Evoking Man Ray's photograms (also named 'rayographs') but switching the light of the sun to that of a television set, Tambellini applies a sheet of photosensitive paper to the CTR (cathode ray tube) monitor and records the activity of turning it off and on for a given time span. Just as his experiments with direct interventions in film, photography becomes cameraless and direct in that the creation of an image takes place on the photographic paper without the involvement of an optical recording device. Significantly, the videograms register both the intentional act of the artist and that of the apparatus – the pure movement of electricity – but also the technological moment in which both the photograph and a CTR monitor functioned as standard means of visual communication embedded in the possibilities of their time. Like no other means, technology anchors a work in time; it splits time into before and after. Technology-based media always imply a certain understanding of time. As the distance from their original implementation in an artwork increases, so too does the awareness of their historical condition. To transfer a glass slide projection or an analogue film into a new, digital, medium always involves a radical change – either a translation, an adaptation or a suppression – of their inherent temporal dimension.

Nonetheless Tambellini's experiments teleport us into a realm in which black wanders between media, and perform an *aesthetic of change* dictated by the transitory character of their physical means, which, in their obsolescence, point to a historical moment and suggest an inherent impossibility for translation into new

technological media.<sup>16</sup> Intermediality returns, not as the quality of being in-between, but rather as the works' capacity to transition fluidly at the conceptual or material level and among media and means. It is an anachronic, ever-becoming, self-referential universe in which every re-enactment – of black or of blackness – is the pre-enactment of the next.

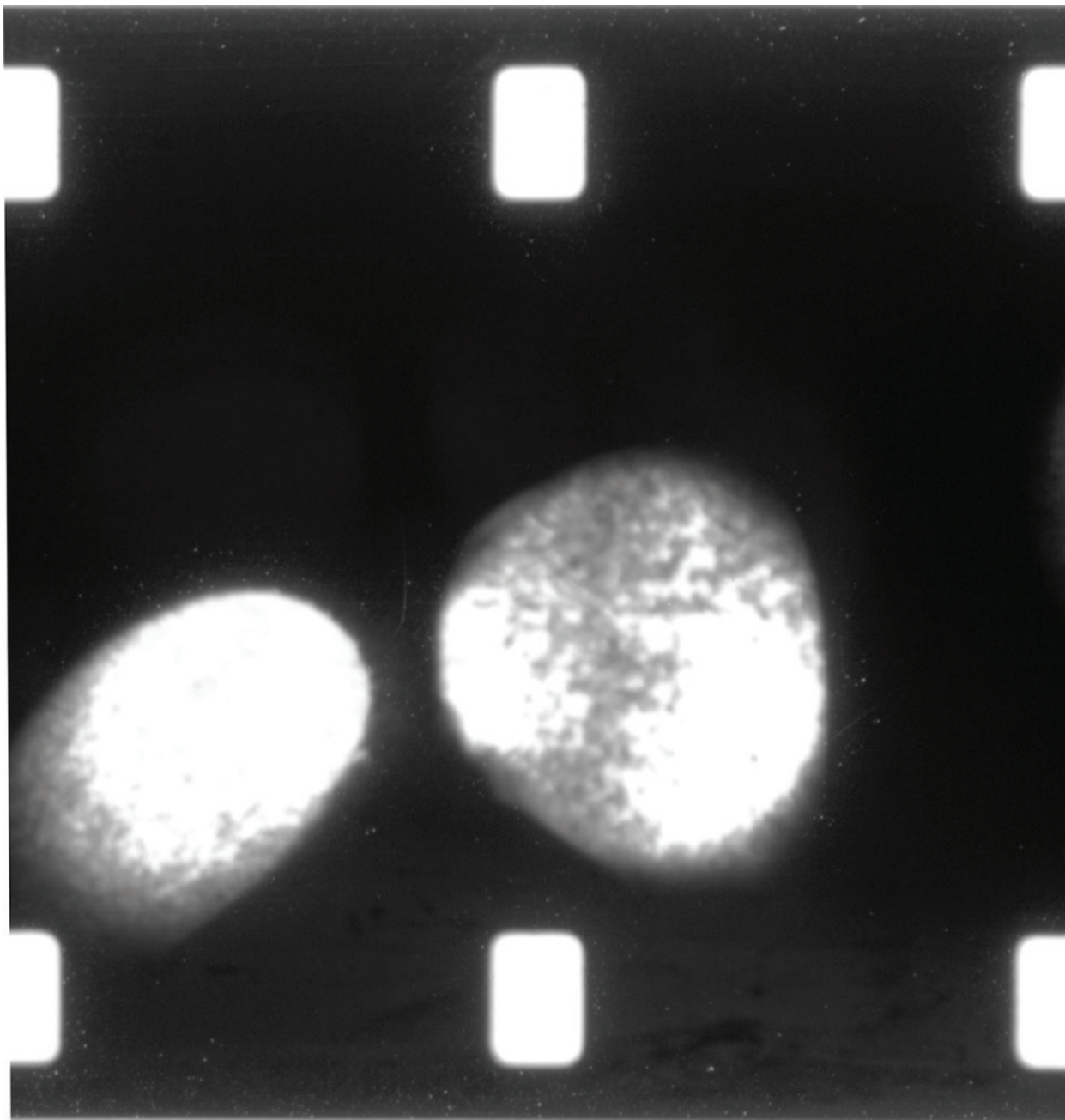
Yet there is something that requires attention. The physical materialisations of these works rely on the specific materialities of their carriers. Due to their mediatic self-referentiality, transposing them into newer digital media without introducing a dramatic change seems impossible. Tambellini's modes of expression can be thought as serving as a temporary material base for his dark material phantasies. In addition to political statement or philosophical concept, black becomes a nomadic, unruly element, always already in relation, perpetually reinaugurating and anticipating future possibilities. Its infinite iterability expands our perceptual awareness. Black occurs, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as a block of sensations and a compound of *percepts* and *affects*.<sup>17</sup> The morphogenetic performance is eternal and unlimited matter, as in Robert Fludd's 1617 graphical black square where black 'gestures' at us and we gesture back via an embodied, experiential encounter.<sup>18</sup> Rather than witnessing alone, we participate, being *in* and *with* black matter. For Tambellini, 'black [...] is like a beginning [...] of what it wants to be rather than what it does not want to be'. This work that is entropic in its mediality, never finished and always in development, finds itself in mattering, in becoming what it wants to be.

- 1 Tambellini quoted in Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, 'Technologies of Blackness: Aldo Tambellini, Psychedelia, Widescreen, Media', *Cultural Critique*, vol.112, Summer 2021, pp.59.
- 2 The description refers to my encounter with Aldo Tambellini's work presented in 'Media Networks. Aldo Tambellini/Room 10', Tate Modern, London, 23 July 2018–4 July 2020.
- 3 Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970, p.308.
- 4 'TV as a Creative Medium', Howard Wise Gallery, New York, 17 May–14 June 1969; 'Vision & Television', Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 21 January–22 February 1970. Tambellini's *Black* was an experimental videotape created at WBGH that included 1000 slides, seven 16mm projectors, 30 black children and three TV cameras. See G. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, *op. cit.*
- 5 Tina Rivers Ryan, 'McLuhan's Bulbs: Light Art and the Dawn of New Media', doctoral thesis, New York: Columbia University, 2016, pp.147–48.
- 6 J. Szczepaniak-Gillece, 'Technologies of Blackness', *op. cit.*
- 7 Philipp Ziegler, 'Aldo Tambellini. Black Matters' [exhibition teaser], ZKM: Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zc4L1vBSspM> (last accessed on 12 June 2021).
- 8 Colby Chamberlain, 'Aldo Tambellini: James Cohan Gallery', *Artforum*, vol.52, no.4, December 2013, pp.263–64. The Harvard Film Archive holds the complete *Black Films Series* and a set of *Black* projection performance films, as projection prints, workprints, tests, outtakes and preservation master of the work (1960–70s). See <https://harvardfilmarchive.org/collections/aldo-tambellini-collection> (last accessed on 20 June 2021). In 2019, Aldo Tambellini Foundation endowed a large gift of his works to the Albright-Knox collection, which is currently the largest holding of his work in an American institution.
- 9 Robert Shuster, 'Best in Show: Aldo Tambellini at Chelsea Art Museum', *The Village Voice*, 12 October 2011, available at <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/10/12/best-in-show-aldo-tambellini-at-chelsea-art-museum/> (last accessed on 19 June 2021).
- 10 Ina Blom, 'Social Signals: Ina Blom on Aldo Tambellini at Tate Modern', *Artforum*, vol.51, no.5, January 2013, p.68.
- 11 Tambellini quoted in Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, 'Technologies of Blackness: Aldo Tambellini, Psychedelia, Widescreen, Media', *op.cit.*, pp.59.
- 12 Dick Higgins, 'Statement on Intermedia', Wolf Vostell (ed.), *Dé-coll/age (décollage)*, no.6, July 1967. Youngblood refers to Tambellini as an intermedia artist.
- 13 Kassia St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Colour*, London: John Murray Publishers, 2016, p.29.
- 14 As formulated in an account of hand-made cinema by film scholar Gregory Zinman. See his *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2020, p.5.
- 15 Lynn Maliszewski, 'Aldo Tambellini's Vidoegrams', *Osmos Magazine*, no.18, Winter 2014.
- 16 H. Hölling, 'The Aesthetic of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent', in Erma Hermens and Frances Robertson (ed.), *Authenticity in Transition*, London: Archetype Publications, 2016, pp.13–24.
- 17 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell), New York and Chichester, Columbia University Press, 1994.
- 18 I owe inspiration to Rebecca Schneider, author of the most appealing account of gesture in performance studies. See, 'In Our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Response-ability. Rebecca Schneider in conversation with Lucia Ruprecht', *Performance Philosophy*, vol.3, no.1, 2017, pp.108–25.

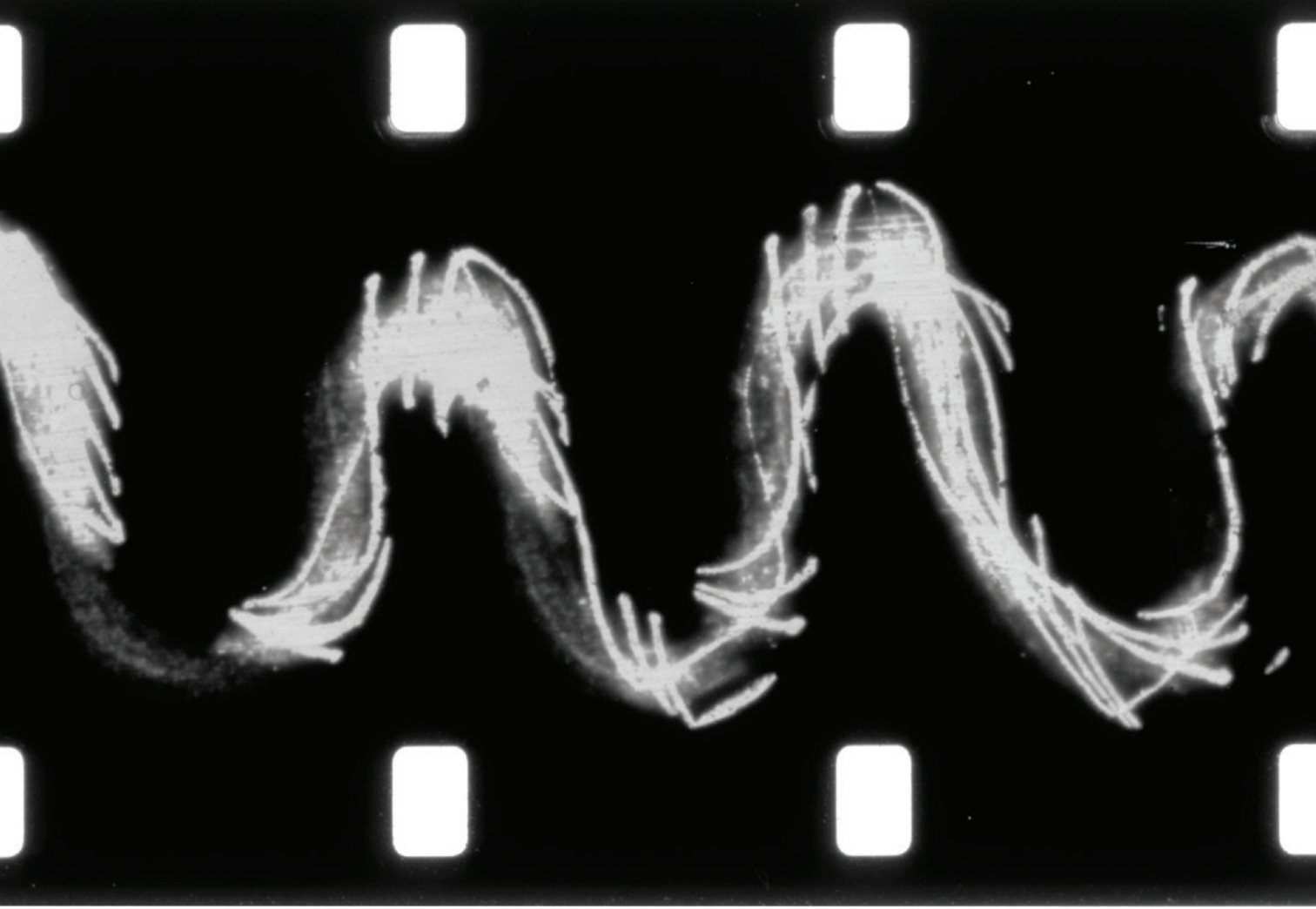


Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, published by Oppenheim, 1617, back page, detail. Courtesy the Wellcome Collection, London





Aldo Tambellini, *Black Is*, 1965,  
manipulated 16mm film, detail.  
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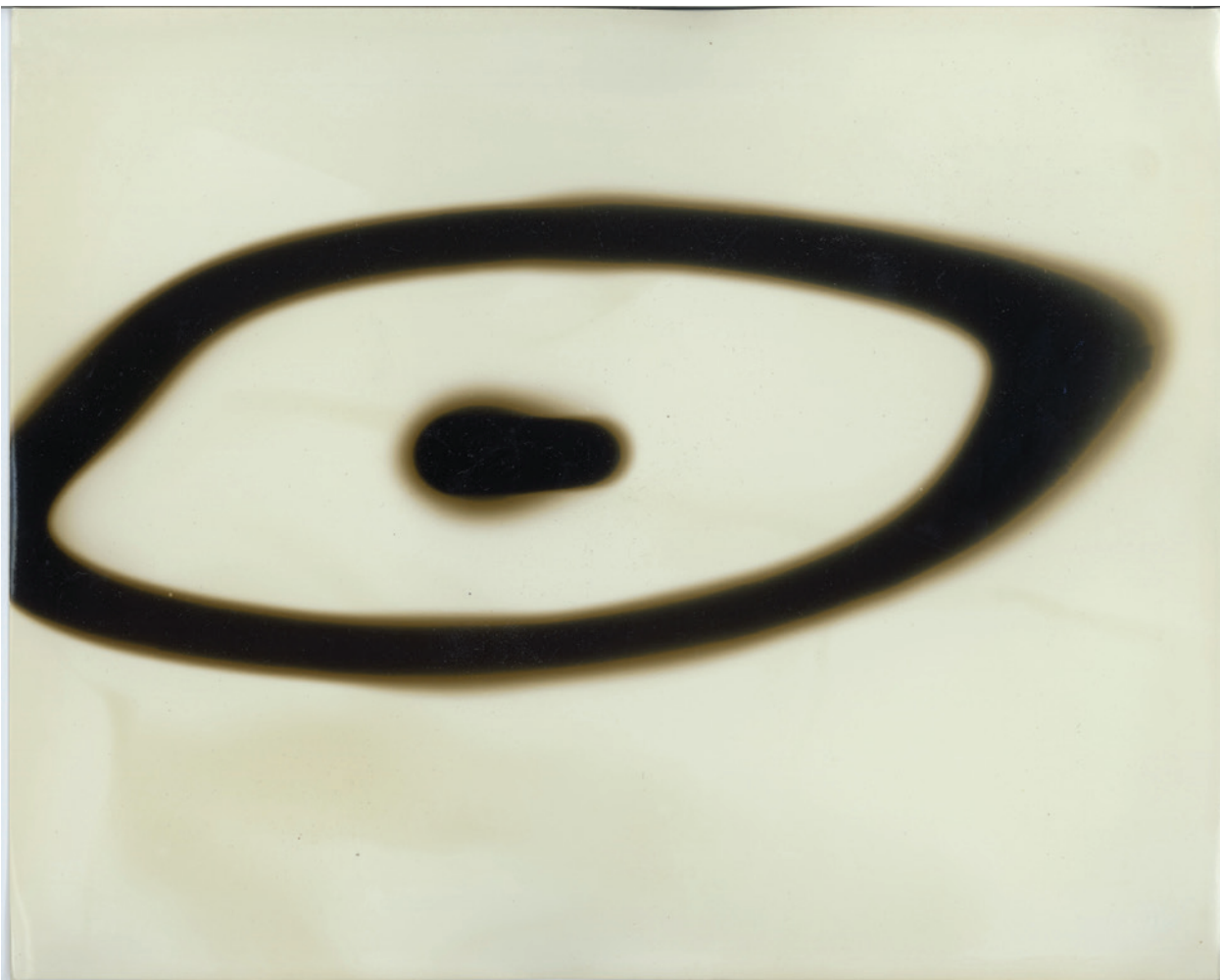
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AFTERALL



Aldo Tambellini, *Black Is*, 1965,  
manipulated 16mm film, detail.  
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Aldo Tambellini, *Videogram*, 1968,  
photograph, gelatin silver print on paper.  
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