4 *Piazza virtuale* on air: 100 days, 600 hours of programming

While the development of *Piazza virtuale* is well documented, there is little information in writing about the time when the show was produced in Kassel. The time for correspondence and preparatory meetings with their agendas and minutes was now over, and everyone involved was working hard on *Piazza virtuale*. When the show went on air, only part of the planned segments were ready to be broadcast, and during the entire 100 days of documenta, work continued on all aspects of the show. *Piazza virtuale* was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that just wouldn't be finished.

To describe the working situation in Kassel, one has to refer to the memories that those involved shared with us in more than 30 interviews. "The feeling was euphoria, a sense of departure, joy that things were finally getting started", Christiane Klappert recalls about the first day of broadcasting. "The time in Kassel during documenta basically went by in a rush. The working atmosphere was definitely very lively, positively suspenseful. There was also the tension, the pressure of being on air every day."[1]

With an extraordinarily small staff, most of whom had never worked on a professional television production before, they now had to create daily shows for more than three months, using self-developed technical equipment that had never before been used in live broadcasting and interactive formats that had not been tested with an actual television audience. The pressure that this situation created is obvious in the statements of those involved, but so is the pride in what they achieved together.

The majority of the staff not only worked together every day, but also lived together in a rented, run-down house in Hannoversch Münden, a small

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1 Interview with Christine Klappert, 20 February 2019.

town outside Kassel, so that after a while this closeness led to tensions. To this day, it is a source of bitterness for many of the *Piazza virtuale* staff that they were not among the official documenta artists, but only part of the exhibition's supporting programme. As a result, they were not invited to the opening, did not receive free tickets for the show, were not even allowed to use the documenta canteen, and felt like second-rate participants in the exhibition.

The staff seem to have spent most of their time in the container studio and on the piazza in front of it. Interestingly, many of them can hardly remember the documenta exhibition, which suggests that there was simply no time to visit it. None of the interviewees, for example, could recall in detail the Electronic Café International (ECI), which had created a meeting point with a performance and lecture programme and a café in the Karlsaue park in Kassel during documenta.[2]

The idea of creating a place for meetings and interactive performances in a temporary structure at the exhibition had a lot in common with *Piazza virtuale* – especially since live video connections to other places via ISDN were part of its programme. The founders of Ponton were also acquainted with some of the organisers, such as Axel Wirth and Ulrich Leistner from the Cologne-based video distributor 235 Media, who had worked on the Minus Delta t media bus at the documenta in 1987, or Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, who, under the name Mobile Image, were among the pioneers of telecommunications art and had created the archetype of the internet café as an art project with the first Electronic Café at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. During the preparation for *Piazza virtuale*, the possibility of a collaboration was even explored with the artist couple as well as with the French artist Don Foresta, who was also involved with ECI.

While the Electronic Café International was located in an elegant and eye-catching building in the form of two unfolded fans, with outdoor catering by Detlev Meyer Voggenreiter, Reinhard Müller and Uwe Wagner of the Cologne design collective Pentagon, the *Piazza virtuale*'s simple container facility suggested a working atmosphere. On the ground floor were offices housing the press department, marketing and administration. On the first floor was the studio with the broadcasting centre, technical equipment and a

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2 See Nitsche, Jessica, "'The Politics of Technological Fantasy': Mit dem Electronic Café International zurück in die Zukunft", *Navigationen* 2, 2021 (in press).

workshop. In a container opposite the main studio was the Newscafe, where coffee by sponsor Lavazza was served and where the Chinese chef Wu Shao-xiang – now an internationally renowned artist – cooked for the staff. In between, plastic chairs and tables stood under umbrellas printed with logos of sponsor Telekom. On the façade of the containers were banners with graphics by Mike Hentz, illustrating the workings of *Piazza virtuale*.

This may not have been the kind of public space Salvatore Vanasco had in mind when he proposed "piazza" as the name for the show. But it was – as many photos and video recordings show – used as a social meeting place by Van Gogh TV staff and their visitors. 3sat representative Katrin Brinkmann remembers: "You can't say it was a beautiful piazza, but it was a piazza."[3] Occasionally, concerts, parties or performances – some of them broadcast on the Piazza virtuale platform Interact with Piazza People – took place here. As Piazza virtuale was not an official documenta project, it was not in the exhibition guide and was therefore not necessarily perceived by visitors as part of the art exhibition to be visited, although it certainly tied in with previous documenta projects such as Joseph Beuys' Office for Direct Democracy

The "Piazza" of Piazza virtuale in Kassel
Photo: altschaffel.com

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3 Interview with Kathrin Brinkmann, 7 May 2018.

(1972) or his Free International University (FIU, 1977). However, as proved by photos and broadcasts from the Access Points (metal cases that contained a camera, a monitor and a microphone and allowed documenta visitors to participate in Piazza virtuale, see Appendix A3.7), documenta visitors did find their way to the piazza.

The daily schedule of *Piazza virtuale* was shaped by the structure of the broadcast. The staff members arrived before 10 every day, and the morning show was broadcast from 11:00 to 12:30 on 3sat. Five staff members were alternately responsible for the technical direction of the programme and moderation of the viewers' contributions, typically under the lead of Salvatore Vanasco; another staff member answered viewers' questions on a hotline. In the afternoon, the schedule for the next day was planned. In the evenings, from 9 to 11, the show for the Olympus satellite was broadcast. Two weeks after the beginning of broadcasting, another daily show for the Berlin station FAB was aired for the first time. At the weekends, 3sat broadcast a show from 1 to 6 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday. In total, almost 600 hours of programming were produced.

4.1   An early example of content moderation

Unlike the previous Van Gogh TV projects *Republic TV* and *Hotel Pompino*, 3sat insisted that a representative of the channel monitored viewers' comments. After a caller had insulted German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on *Hotel Pompino*, they wanted to make sure that obscenities and political propaganda would not be broadcast live on the show. However, the fact that the station assigned freelancer Katrin Brinkmann for this purpose also speaks to the fact that this form of control was relatively low-level. Since some of the Van Gogh TV staff felt committed to the ethos of unhindered free expression, the 3sat representative was seen by some as a "censor".

In our interview, Katrin Brinkmann, who completed a traineeship at 3sat after *Piazza virtuale* and is now a producer at the French–German public channel arte, recalls: "On the one hand, I somewhat became a part of the group, because I was always there. And at the same time I was also the 'enemy' of the broadcaster, and of course that was played with."[4] Ponton founder

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4 Interview with Brinkmann.

Mike Hentz later joked that Katrin Brinkmann was the only person who saw the show in its entirety and therefore was the only one who could assess the accomplishments of the group.[5]

The decision as to which callers would be "kicked off the line" – indicated to the audience by the brief animation of a "Censored" stamp on the screen – was usually made after mutual negotiation. "There was this argument about who would do it. In the end, both sides had access to this censor button, and usually by agreement one of the Ponton people did it."[6] In retrospect, this kind of control can be seen as an early example of the kind of content moderation that contemporary social media seems to have dispensed with.

After the first Piazzettas went on air on 11 July 1992, the coordination of contributions from independent studios all over Europe and Japan became an increasingly important part of the work. Many of the Piazzettas had special technical requirements that time and again presented the team in Kassel with new challenges. Especially in the last weeks of *Piazza virtuale*, the broadcasting time was fiercely fought over, because increasing numbers of Piazzettas went on air, and those who had been contributing for a while wanted to make use of the time that was available.

A memo to all the Piazzettas on 12 August 1992 pointed out:

> There is a great deal of concern about accommodating the growing number of Piazzettas requesting time during the morning schedule, which is only 1 1/2 hours. It is not possible for half-hour time blocks during this time, and some creative solutions are being discussed to solve this logistical problem. A reminder: There is still ample time during the weekend night schedule – which can be utilized for Piazzettas. We hope it will not be mandatory to shift your requests to the weekend.[7]

Friends, acquaintances, artists, journalists, Piazzetta staff and representatives of the sponsors also regularly visited Kassel to be shown around the studio and to discuss the project. The rush seems to have been so great that Ponton even wrote a standard letter telling visitors what the group could and could not do for them: if they registered in time, accommodation in a tent

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5 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

6 Interview with Brinkmann.

7 Fax from Van Gogh TV to all Piazzettas, 12 August 1992.

Team meeting between the containers
Photo: altschaffel.com

was possible, as were studio tours and use of the technology in the News-cafe, but never in the studio. Visitors could not be picked up from the train station and there were no parking spaces or free access to the documenta.[8] Yet many visitors were impressed. Janine Sack, co-organiser of the Hamburg Piazzetta, recalls: "It was really great. It was so technically advanced that I couldn't see through it, but at the same time you understood how great it was, what they had set up there."[9]

For those who had to operate this technology, the feelings were more am-bivalent. Nicolas Baginsky, who helped construct the robot camera, remem-bers his time in Kassel:

A mountain of containers packed to the brim with computers, on which the hottest sun burned for many hours a day – it was hell in there. During the day you could hardly stand it for more than an hour. It was extremely noi-sy, ozone-laden and smelly and humid. The working conditions were really gross there. But then you went outside and there was shade and you could

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8   Letter from Van Gogh TV to the "dear visitors", 5 June 1992.
9   Interview with Cornelia Sollfrank and Janine Sack, 8 June 2018.

drink coffee. It was a great summer and the city was buzzing with visitors from all over the world. But as soon as you had to go back into the box, it got really hard. It was tough work, and you'd sit there in these containers covered in sweat and really suffer.[10]

He also remembers an intense working atmosphere:

There was such a camaraderie, and of course everyone was extremely excited about the challenge. Everyone had to deal with development problems at their workplace, and there were the software developers, who wrote new programs on the fly ... Everyone sat there and worked from morning till night. But everyone was inspired by the work and incredibly ambitious and tried to do something unique.

A hierarchical work culture, which contradicted the Ponton rhetoric of an equal, "self-generating" form of cultural production, was also a problem for a number of the staffers. It led to a few of them leaving during the production of *Piazza virtuale* – in certain cases even without announcing it beforehand.[11] Self-critically, Mike Hentz recalls in our interview: "It was far too much work, and we hardly had any replacements. The people we had were like racehorses. We always had to whip them to keep them running. On a human level, it was over the limit. I never wanted to have a human situation like that ever again."[12]

In addition to the general pressure on the whole group in Kassel, a gender-specific form of hierarchy apparently also contributed to the occasionally foul mood. Many of the female staff members remember a patriarchal style and male bonding. Katrin Brinkmann recalls: "Because it was of course such a large group of men, they sometimes treated each other quite roughly. And there was a clear hierarchy between these four men as leaders and the teams, who were all younger and didn't have as much experience."[13]

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10 Interview with Nicolas Baginsky, 21 February 2019.

11 Interview with Christine Klappert, 20 February 2019; Interview with Sarah Khan-Heiser, June 2019.

12 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

13 Interview with Katrin Brinkmann, 7 May 2018.

4.2 "Hello TV"

Apart from the working conditions, the development of the show may also have contributed to the tensions in the Van Gogh TV team: The audience for which the whole spectacle had been organised showed little inclination to adhere to Ponton's expectations. Apparently, the heralds of the interactive media future had overestimated the actual interactivity: the expected dialogue failed to materialise, the callers' contributions were mostly disappointing. Many callers limited themselves to shouting "Hello" into the phone before hanging up. *Piazza virtuale* was given the mocking name "Hello TV". The concept of "self-generating" broadcast content without intervention and moderation by the makers disappointed those who had long worked towards it, and this concept was quietly abandoned. Katrin Brinkmann remembers: "The decision to moderate after all came relatively quickly, after three or four days. 3sat complained: 'More has to happen.' Of course, *Coffeehouse* then immediately offered itself as a possibility to intervene. The hosts became a kind of waiter."[14]

3sat published a press release on 13 June 1992, one month after the start of *Piazza virtuale*, which tried to explain the weaknesses of the show as due to its innovative character and at the same time announced changes:

> What has the first phase of this unusual experiment shown? The playful offers via telephone keyboard – making music together in the disco or in the interactive classical orchestra, collective painting in the virtual studio or operating the robot camera Muskart – are understood and perceived by the viewers as opportunities to participate. Above all, however, *Coffeehouse*, where participants can communicate with each other by fax, modem and telephone, enjoys great popularity. Admittedly, most of the contributions are not yet really creative. "Hello – is anyone there?" "I'm from Munich – where are you from?" "Nice weather today" are the first timid attempts to approach television in an interactive way. Next week, new programmes with concrete thematic offerings kick off a policy and art discussion to channel and deepen communication among Piazza visitors.[15]

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14 Ibid.

15 "Already 25,000 visitors at the Piazza virtuale at 3sat", press release of the ZDF press office, 13 July 1992.

This never happened, however. There were no discussions on given topics at *Piazza virtuale.* Even though work on the show continued behind the scenes and the broadcasting management soon became involved in the conversations of the viewers, the concept of an autopoetic, self-generating programme was officially maintained throughout the show.

This lack of consideration of the actual communication also led to the charge that the group was too technology-centred. Cornelia Sollfrank, who participated in the Hamburg Piazzetta, says in retrospect:

> It was really about technology first and foremost. There was no debate about the project and about what works or what doesn't work, or what could be done differently. If you go to the documenta now, you don't find anything like that anymore. It was a great thing that it was there at all. But what it meant, especially in the art context, could also have been asked. Such discussions simply did not take place.[16]

4.3 The fans

Whereas the random encounters of callers to segments like *Coffeehouse* rarely led to meaningful conversations, there was one part of the show where a group of like-minded individuals met, bonded and formed something close to the "virtual community" that Howard Rheingold had described in his important book on early internet culture[17] and that Ponton had also expected to emerge during *Piazza virtuale*. This happened not on the 3sat shows but during the nightly two hours of *Piazza virtuale* that were broadcast via the Olympus satellite. This part of the show could only be seen by people who specifically searched the range of international television satellites using their private satellite dishes and came across *Piazza virtuale* by chance. The broadcast via Olympus was less structured than the 3sat shows. After a couple of weeks it was mostly just the talk format *Coffeehouse*. Since there were fewer callers, the time for calls was also not limited – unlike in the morning broadcasts on 3sat. This often led to longer and more in-depth conversations than during the day.

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16 Interview with Janine Sack and Cornelia Sollfrank, 8 June 2018.

17 Rheingold, Howard, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

These viewers were among the show's most loyal followers. They were usually tech-savvy and interested in how *Piazza virtuale* was realised. Some called regularly, some became friends and even went to documenta together to visit the studio. One of the most regular callers even had his phone cut off because he could no longer pay his phone bill. On 22 August 1990, there was a party for the programme's fans, with some of them visiting Kassel and participating in the show. From today's perspective, this networking of like-minded people via a technical medium can be seen as the kind of early "virtual community" that did not arise during most of *Piazza virtuale*.

Karel Dudesek and composer
Manuel Tessloff take a break
Photo: altschaffel.com

4.4 *Sendeschluss* (end of broadcast)

"From mid-August onwards, we were often worried that we wouldn't be able to do the show because everyone was sick. Because it was just the strain of two years breaking out all at once. The goal was to reach the last day of broadcasting. That was intense at times", Salvatore Vanasco recalls of the last weeks of *Piazza virtuale*.[18] The heavy workload began to wear down the staff, and meeting minutes from that time record numerous conflicts among them.

On 19 September 1992, during the night from Saturday to Sunday, the last show was broadcast with live contributions from Kassel and short interventions from various Piazzettas. In the process, many of the – visibly exhaus-

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18 Interview with Salvatore Vanasco, 8 June 2018.

ted – staff members introduced themselves in front of the camera – all of a sudden, at the very end, the previously impersonal and abstract show gained a human face. The intoxicating show is one of the highlights of *Piazza virtuale*.

On Sunday morning, *Piazza virtuale* went on air for the last time. A hooded Karel Dudesk ends the broadcast by asking the viewers to look for the secret phone key that supposedly could have been used to turn off *Piazza virtuale* all along. When a caller finally presses 5, the broadcast cuts off and *Piazza virtuale* is over. In Kassel, the end of the project was celebrated with a party at the trendy bar Europäischer Hof.

The dismantling of the studio began on the same day. Salvatore Vanasco remembers the end:

> When something like this ends, you fall into a hole. Many people got ill again. I drove from Kassel to Hamburg with all the equipment and brought it back to the Lab. And then we were broke. I was there alone with these endless big boxes: computer worlds, none of which had been set up. It took me two months to put it all back together.[19]

Press officer Ludwig Seyfarth
Photo: altschaffel.com

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19 Ibid.

Meeting with Benjamin Heidersberger, press officer Christiane Klappert,
Karel Dudesek and Salvatore Vanasco (from left)
Photo: altschaffel.com