3   The making of *Piazza virtuale*

On 7 January 1990, Benjamin Heidersberger notes in his sketchbook with a fine black pen on lined paper: "Decode the Touch-Tone to Control a Brush." The entry is carefully framed.

A good year later, the idea reappears in his notes. On 3 April 1991, in another sketchbook, there is a drawing with the heading "Tic Tac Toe via Touch Tone in TV" and a sketch of a TV monitor with the three-by-three fields of the Tic Tac Toe game connected with stylised telephones. Underneath, a few short notes: "Touch Tone Keyboard corresponds to game field... 15 min. playing time... Winner continues playing..."

In the months that followed, the sketch served as the starting point for the development of software that translated the tones of the push-button telephone into frequencies that could be used to control computer applications. It was the basis for all segments of Van Gogh TV's *Piazza virtuale*, where applications were controlled by telephone in the studio.

<div align="center">***</div>

In July 1991, the members of Van Gogh TV were invited to the theatre festival in Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna. They strolled through the town together. Salvatore Vanasco, who comes from an Italian immigrant family, remembers:

> I had always told my colleagues what a piazza was, but they had never seen it like that. When we were there, [...] we stood on the piazza, and then they experienced it for themselves: the diversity, the versatility, also these changing positions, the changing attitudes of people in such places. All of a sudden we had a very conscious outlook.[1]

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1   Interview with Salvatore Vanasco, 8 June 2018.

The shared experience not only gave their next project the name *Piazza virtuale* but also sparked the idea to transfer the social interaction from a public space like that of an Italian piazza to the electronic mass medium of television: "That's where the *Piazza virtuale* initialises itself, where you go from the square of the piazza to the rectangle of the monitor. And then you experience the translation from the analogue to the virtual piazza."[2]

<div align="center">***</div>

Two scenes from the prehistory of *Piazza virtuale* – and from a time when no one knew that very soon there would be a *Piazza virtuale*. Less than a year after the members of Van Gogh TV admired the Italian piazza, the documenta opened on 13 June 1992 and *Piazza virtuale* went on air the same day.

What is impressive about the show is not only the radicality of the approach, the novelty of the programme ideas and its technical innovations. It is also the sheer speed with which Van Gogh TV developed all these ideas, and then implemented them within a year. The immense organisational effort that went into the biggest television art project ever will be traced in detail in this chapter.

What was the situation of the group in the summer of 1991 when the opportunity arose to carry out a television project at documenta? For some of those involved, this was to be their second documenta participation: Mike Hentz and Karel Dudesek were already part of the performance programme at documenta in 1987 with Minus Delta t and at the same time operated a semi-legal radio station, in which Benjamin Heidersberger had also participated. With the successor organisations Ponton and Van Gogh TV, respectively, they had drawn attention to themselves with provocative actions at various media art events, and the group had finally even succeeded in actually getting these shows on television: in 1989 and 1990, Ponton had produced the shows *Republik TV* and *Hotel Pompino*, respectively, at Ars Electronica, which were broadcast on 3sat; in May 1991, the programme *Ballroom TV* from the Berlin club 90 Grad was broadcast on the local station FAB.

Artists had previously received little attention in the mass medium of television; Ponton had succeeded in conquering this medium without adhering to its conventions in any way. All these shows also contained innovations in line with the latest technological developments: direct interaction with the viewer,

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2 Ibid.

the use of online chat, innovative image design and video effects as well as digital graphics and, in the case of *Hotel Pompino*, apparently the first virtual studio in Europe. Even those who found the shows chaotic and confusing (which they undoubtedly were) had to admit that this chaos was state of the art.

They did so at a time when great hopes for new forms of media were in the air due to the incipient digitalisation of the media. Terms like "multimedia", "cyberspace", "virtual reality" and "metaverse" had been around since the mid-1980s, thanks in part to cyberpunk science fiction, which often dealt with digital networks. At that time, of course, only the military, research institutions and large companies actually had access to these networks. Before the internet and World Wide Web began to take hold from the mid-1990s onwards, interactive television was considered by many to be the future of media. Time Warner, British Telecommunication and Deutsche Telekom conducted elaborate field trials with the new technology that ultimately never took off.

3.1 Artist-engineers: "The courage not to intervene"

Ponton, through its television projects, seemed to be in a particularly good position to provide content for the new medium of interactive television that many saw as the next big thing in media. In the lab in Hamburg, the group had already developed ideas to involve users interactively in their shows before *Piazza virtuale*. Ponton had its media lab in a former machine factory in Hamburg, which had been turned into a *Haus für Kunst und Handwerk* (house for arts and crafts) in 1981. The lab extended over two floors. It was actually an outlier in an environment where carpenters, bookbinders and jewellers had (and still have) their workshops. Their presence in the building was explained by Klaus-Peter Dencker, then senior government director at the Cultural Office – who followed the group's activities with sympathy and interest and also repeatedly provided financial support – seeing Ponton as the "artisans of tomorrow".[3]

In the approximately 250-square-metre premises, which reminded visitors of a "commune" or a "Merzbau" à la Dada artist Kurt Schwitters, an impressive array of equipment quickly accumulated. Photos and videos from

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3 Interview with Klaus Peter Dencker, 21 February 2019.

The feminist art group Frauen und Technik (Women and Technology) visits
Ponton´s media lab in Hamburg. They broadcast their Piazzetta Hamburg from
this location, while Van Gogh TV were at the documenta in Kassel.
Photo: altschaffel.com

around 1990 show long rows of computers, monitors, video recorders, edit-
ing suites, mixing desks and other equipment. By this time, the Van Gogh TV
staff had already earned a reputation as tech-savvy early adopters. Comput-
er and software companies often provided them with beta versions of their
developments, which the group tested and gave feedback to the developers.
Benjamin Heidersberger recalls: "It was an exploration of the possible appli-
cations of new technology. The industry quickly recognised this at the time
and provided us with hardware and software without end. New boxes arrived
every day."[4] The cooperation with companies such as Dr Neuhaus, Steinberg,
Roland and miro also led to these companies later sponsoring *Piazza virtuale*.

In a text that appeared in a special edition of the computer magazine
MacUp on the occasion of documenta, there is this description of the lab:

At first, I cannot discover anything of virtual reality, telepresence or even cy-
berspace in the Hamburg Ponton European Media Lab. On the contrary: in-
stead of immersing myself in diffuse unreal worlds, I find myself in the midst

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4 Ernst et al., "Reimagining *Piazza virtuale* – A Conversation with Van Gogh-TV",, 142.

of an immensely real and tangible chaos. There is an impenetrable mess of cables, garnished with computers of various brands, video equipment, synthesizers and many other devices, some of which are difficult to identify. In the midst of it all – as a dressing, so to speak, which gives the whole thing flavour and meaning – the 20 or so members of the Van Gogh TV team work as artists, software developers, technicians, media scientists and music experts all at the same time.[5]

And the magazine *Prinz* wrote about the preparation of *Piazza virtuale*:

The *Ponton* lab has little to do with a normal artist's studio – this is not a place where lonely artistic geniuses have flashes of inspiration. They work collectively, often 18 hours a day. The elaborate, computer-controlled screen surfaces have to be designed, the electronic switching system has to be in place. Piano, violin and disco sounds resound from the basement – the "interactive studio" is being tested.[6]

This description is obviously informed by the group's self-image as artist-engineers, which they had begun to cultivate at this time: Instead of producing their own works as an expression of their individual creativity as artists, they wanted to build platforms on which others could articulate themselves, an attitude that I described in the introduction as the shift from subject to project, and which is somewhat reminiscent of the avant-garde artists in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. This attitude went so far that at times the individual participants were no longer mentioned in texts about the group. In interviews, only the collective Van Gogh TV answered instead of the individual members; group pictures were undesirable: "There are to be no people, no pop group aesthetics of any kind",[7] one memo says about their press material.

This attitude is described in the documenta catalogue:

The artists of Van Gogh TV do not broadcast pre-produced videos and have not conceived the *Piazza virtuale* as their forum. They see themselves as construc-

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5 Müller, Roey, "Kabel, Chaos und Kultur", *MacUp* (special edition for documenta), 1992, pp. 5–8, at 5.

6 Broch-Madsen, Marion, "Kunst im Kanal", *Prinz Hamburg*, June 1992.

7 Minutes of a meeting on 11 February 1992.

tors of a new communicative structure that provides an alternative to ideas such as those pursued by the industry, and they take over the maintenance of the machines in the background. Van Gogh TV has built a self-generating work of art, a communication machine that functions in the network and as a network. The *Piazza virtuale* is an experimental arrangement whose result we do not know. ... The task of artists has changed. ... Artists limit themselves to determining the content of a broadcast; Van Gogh TV however adheres to a concept that has long been discussed in media theory but so far has had few practical consequences: the broadcast station itself is the work of art.[8]

The group explicitly distanced itself from the kind of interactive media art that at that time was often concerned with installations using sophisticated technology and instead stressed the role of the audience as a producer of content. The American magazine *Wired*, in an article published after *Piazza virtuale*, reported: "But implementation means paying attention to the needs and processes of society, Vanasco says: 'You need to know about phones, design, images, and how to link them, but there are also the needs of the people you don't know. *Piazza* used just a stupid phone and TV set. We showed that you don't need a supercomputer to get results.'"[9]

Many of the performances and actions by Minus Delta t had already sought to create "open situations", to provoke the audience to participate and interact. In *Piazza virtuale*, this concept was transferred into a technical medium. Karel Dudesek explains:

The basic idea of *Piazza virtuale* was mainly conceived by Benjamin Heidersberger. I think it was immediately clear to all of us that this was the right way to go, without any ifs and buts. Perhaps it was also the case that only Benjamin understood the *Piazza virtuale* to its fullest extent. Because in the end he also had to guarantee the technical realisation, he was also the only one who could think and realise it technically.[10]

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8 Ohrt, Roberto; Seyfarth, Ludwig, "Van Gogh TV – Piazza virtuale: 100 Tage interaktives Kunst-Fernsehen", in *documenta* IX, vol. 1, *Essays, Biographien*, Stuttgart: Cantz, 1992, pp. 250–251.

9 Marshall, Jules, "The Medium is the Mission", *Wired* 1, 1992, https://www.wired.com/1993/05/medium-mission/

10 Ernst et al., "*Reimagining Piazza virtuale* – A Conversation with Van Gogh-TV", p. 133.

This artistic concept led to an attitude that Salvatore Vanasco described in our interview as "the courage not to intervene" – to create possibilities for interaction for the audience without any prescription on how to use them.

3.2 Two kinds of interactivity

Around 1990, "interactivity" was a key term in media studies as well as in media art and new media design. Countless media studies and communication studies texts from this time attempt to grasp the phenomenon theoretically and to describe the various forms of interactivity that digital media made possible.[11] Designers tried to make their creations as interactive as possible in order to exploit the specific properties of digital media. And in media art, the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the heyday of interactive media installations by artists such as Jeffrey Shaw, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Toshio Iwai, Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau and Perry Hoberman, where viewers could control digital environments via touch screens and other peripherals.[12]

   The members of Van Gogh TV still use the term "interactivity" for all the segments they developed for *Piazza virtuale*, which can lead to confusion. If you look at them more closely, you can distinguish two very different kinds of interaction, which overlap in some formats: social and technical interactivity. By controlling applications with touch-tone signals from the phone, Van Gogh TV had made technical interactivity possible, with viewers operating by phone the computer programs that the group had developed. Shows that featured this kind of interaction were, for example, *Atelier* (Studio), where callers could create drawings together, or *Interactive Classical Orchestra*, where users triggered samples to make music together. In the terminology of an encyclopaedia on new media published in 2003, this is "user-to-system interactivity".[13] Then there were applications where callers could retrieve di-

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11 For a selection of academic writings on interactivity from that period, see the entry on "Interactivity" in Jones, Steve (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA/London/New Delhi: Sage, 2003, pp. 241–244.

12 Dinkla, Sönke, "From Participation to Interaction: Toward the Origins of Interactive Art", in Herrschmann, Lynn (ed.), *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1996, pp. 279–290.

13 Jones, *Encyclopedia*, p. 242.

gitally stored data. These included, for example, *tazetta*, where one could use the telephone keypad to get news from the daily newspaper *taz* in a way that bears a strong resemblance to web surfing today. The *Encyclopedia of New Media* suggests the term "user-to-document interactivity" for this.[14]

Other segments were characterised by social interactivity, for which the encyclopaedia offers the term "user-to-user interactivity". (From today's perspective, it is amusing that this kind of interaction, which is ultimately a technically supported form of traditional dialogue between people, is given a term that equates it with the retrieval of documents or the triggering of samples or videos.) The segments that made social interaction possible included *Coffeehouse*, where callers could talk to each other, but also the computer mailbox, where dialogue took place via chat.

In some segments, however, there was also overlap between these different types of interactivity: In *Robocam*, it was not only possible to direct a camera in the studio via the telephone keypad, but also to talk to the Ponton staff through its lens. With *Sarah and Daniel*, callers could comment on the actions of the two figures, who were directed by other callers who could not speak themselves.

3.3 The piazza and the *Piazza virtuale*: Spatial concepts

"The viewer is welcome to stay in his pyjamas, but he should show himself to the virtual public on the streets. Better and more targeted channel surfing – why not? It is more important, however, to become a broadcaster yourself. In the privacy of his own slippers, the viewer operates the functions of the machine."[15] So says the article about *Piazza virtuale* in the documenta catalogue. On the one hand, this use of spatial metaphors is an attempt to apply familiar terms to the new technology of digital data networks. On the other hand, it resonates with the hope that this new technology could create new possibilities for participation in public discourse.

Both tendencies also characterise the early debate about the internet in the second half of the 1990s. The net is referred to as "cyberspace", as a "data

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14 Ibid.

15 "Van Gogh TV – Piazza Virtuale: 100 Days of Interactive Art Television", *documenta IX catalogue*, pp. 250–251.

highway" over which one "surfs" using software with names like "Navigator" or "Safari" when one "goes online" – with terminology like this, which refers to physical space and its traversal, people tried to make sense of a new technology that in fact transcended space. The hope often expressed in this period for a "telepolis", a "virtual marketplace of opinions" or an "electronic agora", thanks to which the American vice-president Al Gore saw "a new Athenian age of democracy" coming, refers not only to forms of popular rule and political debate, but also precisely to the physical places where they took place.

The spatial metaphors used in *Piazza virtuale* can be seen as part of this kind of thinking, especially since the title of the show itself signalled its creators' intention to transfer the physical space of the Italian piazza, with its flâneurs and casual and accidental contacts, into an electronic medium.[16] Early storyboards feature visual motifs such as maps, city squares, a "Speaker's Corner" in a "Hyde Park" and various architectural motifs. A press kit for the project is also adorned with a digital graphic showing a modern city backdrop with skyscrapers superimposed on a telephone keypad. Simple 3D computer graphics of stylised cityscapes can be seen in the trailer for *Piazza virtuale* and in the opening credits of the programme *Marketplace*. Titles such as *Coffeehouse* or *Marketplace*, *Medialandscape*, *School* and *Confessional* also refer to physical space and its elements. Last but not least, the physical space in Kassel was initially to be brought into the *Piazza virtuale* via transmissions from surveillance cameras in a media installation; when this was rejected by the exhibition management, the group constructed its own terminals with monitors and cameras by which visitors in Kassel could participate in the show.

On closer inspection, however, it is significant that not much of this spatial imagery has remained in the actual show. The iconography of the on-air design brings together very different visual worlds in a kind of digital bricolage: in *Atelier*, for example, small symbols in the manner of desktop icons meet simple, black-and-white computer sketches and the scanned photo of a picture frame; in *Coffeehouse*, the photographic image of a wooden door is combined with the windows of a PC interface and stylised pictograms of telephones and modems.

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16 See Glauner, Hannah, "Piazza Virtuale – The Public Sphere and Its Expansion Beyond the Physical", in Ernst, Christoph; Schröter, Jens (eds.), *(Re-)Imagining New Media: Techno-Imaginaries around 2000 and the Case of "Piazza virtuale" (1992)*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2021, pp. 31–45.

The creators of the program's interfaces showed little interest in sticking to a predetermined visual language. Rather, they used the graphic possibilities of their new Amiga and Macintosh computers for exactly the kind of bold, arbitrary combination of visual elements that is on the one hand a characteristic of postmodernism and at the same time a genuine feature of copy-and-pasted images from endless digital visual reservoirs that still characterises net culture today with its GIFs, memes and mash-ups.

The documenta catalogue essay also refers to this disparity of the imagery, which combines "live image, still image, drawing, writing, sound, music, computer animation". Even though the text continues to make occasional use of metaphors from architecture and urban space, it eventually introduces a different system by which the unfamiliar media format will adapt to the habits of its viewers. "To facilitate orientation in the architecture of the Piazza, Van Gogh TV has developed a timetable. It consists of blocks that recur at set times of the day and thus structure the programme schedule."[17] These blocks structure the flow of the programme – as in *television*?

Just as Van Gogh TV eventually stuck to a programme structure that fit the character of its medium better than spatial concepts, spatial metaphors were also a short-lived phenomenon on the internet. While early network projects such as *De Digitale Stad* (The digital city) in Amsterdam, *Internationale Stadt* in Berlin and *Geocities* still – like *Piazza virtuale* – used terms from physical space, the social media of the next decade – Facebook or Twitter, for example – no longer needed such terminological crutches, but came up with terms that worked better for their medium: a development that *Piazza virtuale* had already anticipated.

3.4 How did the piazza come to documenta?

From an interview on the development of *Piazza virtuale*:

> The concept was outlined very roughly: Live television 24 hours a day for 100 days, interactivity, programme blocks … But nothing more. For example, it was not at all clear that we would now put ourselves forward so much but rather would focus on self-generation [by the audience]. Jan Hoet has promised

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17 Ohrt; Seyfarth, "Van Gogh TV – Piazza virtuale", pp. 250–251.

us that we can freely develop our ideas, that we can realise what we consider to be the next important step after years of practice in the media. There will be no media art at the documenta because Hoet misses an artistic quality in so-called media art, and we share this assessment. Our project is an open experimental arrangement that will make its elements transparent in the process and which is developing its precise form only in this process … We are counting on dialogue, on the ability to learn and on self-control mechanisms that will replace the monologue.[18]

The rather poetic description of the show published in the documenta catalogue also shows that it was by no means clear at that time what *Piazza virtuale* would look like:

From the disco flicker to the tired waking dream of the traffic monitoring system, from the text that wanders from the computer network to the voice from the telephone, from the poster drawn in the fax machine to the digitised colour that lingers in the videophone and flashes across satellites – the configurations of the broadcast image created by the computer want to simultaneously serve the construction of interactivity and provide the example of a possible transparency of the communication channels. Television is the material of this image.[19]

Piazza virtuale initially developed out of a collaboration between Ponton and Rolf Lobeck, at that time a professor in the Visual Communication Department at the Gesamthochschule Kassel. Lobeck wanted to make a television show on documenta with his students, which was to be broadcast on the newly founded public-access channel in Kassel. Ponton had been looking for an opportunity to do a new television project after Ars Electronica showed no interest in its proposals due to the scandal about *Hotel Pompino*. Whether the group joined forces with Lobeck for this purpose or whether Jan Hoet suggested the collaboration cannot be clarified today. Ponton and Lobeck worked with his students on a television project for the documenta for just under a year, until Lobeck terminated the collaboration at the end of April 1992 and

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18 Ohrt, Roberto, "Van Gogh TV", *Artis* 6, 1992.

19 Ibid.

instead organised his own television project entitled "Let there be TV", which was broadcast on Kassel's public-access channel as he had originally planned.

Until then, Ponton and the Gesamthochschule were mentioned as co-organisers in official publications, funding applications, proposals and letters. In retrospect, it is impossible to determine in detail who came up with which ideas and which broadcasting concepts. In a letter by Karel Dudesek, apparently written at the beginning of July 1991, there are already references to segments that existed at *Piazza virtuale* – however, it is unclear whether this was a joint concept or if it was written by Ponton.

First of all, the live character of the show is stressed, "in order to avoid the station becoming a replay station of video archives."[20] This idea can be traced back to the performance roots of Minus Delta t. The plan is to "install a live TV studio in a room of at least 200 square metres in the centre of Kassel with a connection to the public-access channel". In this studio, according to another undated concept paper, "national and international media artists will realise their ideas of interactive, live art with television, computers and telecommunication technology that will involve the visitors and the inhabitants of Kassel (the spectator as the actual art object). The result of such a meeting will be an electronic fresco".[21]

This show was to be broadcast via radio relay to the public-access channel in Kassel and from there to other public-access channels in Germany around the clock for the entire run of documenta. At this time, show elements à la *Hotel Pompino* would also have been possible within this concept, even though there was already talk of "autopoetic, self-regulating objects and situations".

The ideas listed in the first concept include: "interactive television games, live music and live image mix, mailbox conversation, local productions with reference to the documenta, an automatic host, party TV, recordings from the surveillance cameras in Kassel, automatic control of synthesizers via MIDI, gossip, Hyde Park box and a 'shopping centre'". Contributions from other cities are also mentioned, for example Berlin, Zurich, Bremen and Lyon, where there were later Piazzettas during *Piazza virtuale*, but also from other cities, such as Hanover and Amsterdam, where there were not.

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20 This and the following quotes are from an undated letter from Karel Dudesek to Rolf Lobeck.

21 Undated concept paper "kunstfernsehen zur documenta 9: 100 Tage / 24 Stunden live und interaktiv".

Even if not every one of these ideas was developed into a segment of its own, virtually all of them were implemented to various degrees at *Piazza virtuale*. For example, there were no transmissions of surveillance camera images in the show, an idea that comes up frequently in early concepts. These images were originally also to be shown in a media installation in the exhibition with the working title *Teppich* (Carpet), plans were made for a "portico" at the entrance to the exhibition, where visitors would be filmed and the recordings shown on small monitors: "All visitors walk through the medium", as one concept paper puts it. Although this idea was not realised, because documenta curator Jan Hoet turned it down, footage of the queue in front of the Fridericianum and other exhibition venues was frequently shown in the background of the format *Mediascape*, for example.

Later minutes of meetings, however, suggest that many ideas for shows were suggested but were not realised: "television kitchen, art encyclopaedia, playhouse, bulletin board, music, animals, tele-therapy" appear in a new concept, for which Ponton Europe MediaArtLab and Gesamthochschule Kassel are now mentioned as "project management" and Rolf Lobeck's office as the contact address. These notes seem to refer to features that did not make it into the final show. In a newly inserted paragraph, the planned programme is also characterised as a kind of anti-television that opposes the conventions of the medium:

> The point is to transport art into living rooms, where feedback about the everyday takes place (two-way television). In contrast to the usual images of the staged transport of goods, the importance of selected information of the mass media, the focus will be on the importance of "banality" and the everyday, including the empty studio where nothing any longer takes place, everything is stalled, in order to introduce real time to the medium of television.[22]

In these early concepts, Kassel is of far greater importance than in the actual show. For example, there was the idea of shooting video in Kassel citizens' homes in the run-up to the documenta as an "ethnology of everyday life" under the name "regionale volklore" – an idea that was not realised. This is reminiscent of the video documentaries that Minus Delta t and Van Gogh TV

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22 Undated draft "kunstfernsehen zur documenta 9: 100 Tage/24 Stunden live und interaktiv", 16 August 1991.

created for their European Mobile Media Art Project. The idea is also reminiscent of the group's desire to develop an equivalent to traditional folklore and local culture in the electronic media.

In December 1991, "Mr. Karel Dudesek and Prof. Rolf Lobeck were invited by Mr Jan Hoet, the artistic director of documenta IX, to a project to be realised together. They agreed to give the project the title *Piazza virtuale* and Van Gogh TV was the organiser."[23] The formal invitation to documenta was therefore only issued about half a year before the show opened.

Piazza virtuale was not promoted as an art project, but merely as part of the documenta's supporting programme. documenta curator Jan Hoet repeatedly made it clear that he considered the project a "very interesting contribution to experimental television and as such a challenging part of the documenta supporting programme". At the same time, however, he qualifies: "In addition to its own page in the catalogue, this project will receive the full support of documenta's public and press relations. Furthermore, documenta is not responsible for the financial realisation of this project and in this respect leaves Prof. Lobeck and Karel Dudesek free reign with regard to the further implementation."[24]

3.5 "He virtually signed an empty screen": *Piazza virtuale* on 3sat

When 3sat – which had already broadcast the Ponton projects *Republic TV* and *Hotel Pompino* – agreed to broadcast the show is not clear from the available documents. However, this agreement most likely took place after the official invitation to documenta – according to the recollection of some of those involved, possibly as late as February 1992, less than five months before the exhibition opened. Thus, the time schedule for the realisation of 100 days of a daily live show was tight. What was agreed with 3sat cannot be clarified; possibly nothing at all. Benjamin Heidersberger recalls: "There was no discussion about content, no questions were asked. I honestly don't even know if there was ever a real proposal."[25]

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23 Letter from Van Gogh TV to a Hamburg lawyer, 25 February 1992, unsigned.

24 Draft letter by Jan Hoet without addressee, 12 December 1991.

25 Interview with Benjamin Heidersberger, 14 April 2018.

Despite more than three years of research, we have not been able to locate the contract between Ponton and 3sat for *Piazza virtuale* or a proposal for the show by Ponton. Nothing was to be found in the documents we received from the members of Van Gogh TV, although every other delivery receipt was filed. At 3sat, all archive documents were destroyed a few years before we started our research. Karel Dudesek remembers the signing of the contract with 3sat:

> They didn't understand what we were doing. The most beautiful story in this project was the signing of the contract with ZDF, when the old chairmen [Dr Walter Konrad] asked the question: "Well, gentlemen, what will we see on the screen then?" And we said, "We don't know." Of course, that's a broadcaster's nightmare. And then he said, "Okay, then we'll sign that." That's unheard of. An entire world is invalidated, and he virtually signed an empty screen.[26]

In the absence of a written agreement, we have to rely on the memories of those involved. According to what we heard in our interviews, the station supported the group. However, for 3sat the investment was relatively small: the broadcaster paid only a total of DM30,000 for more than 200 hours of programming; Ponton raised the bulk of the budget itself from sponsors and public institutions. The morning slot for *Piazza virtuale* was previously used to show excerpts from the 3sat teletext, so this programme slot, like the night slots on weekends, was not sought after in the programming schedule. At the same time, the station was generous in terms of granting re-broadcasting rights, so *Piazza virtuale* was also shown by TV stations in the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovenia.

Piazza virtuale met the programming requirements of 3sat, which was and still is a public cultural station and at that time used the adverting slogan "Anders fernsehen" (A different kind of television). "We were there to try things out", says Wolfgang Bergmann, the producer of the show, in our interview. "Experiments were something you could do back then. We weren't overrun by viewers, the distribution of 3sat was still rather homeopathic."[27]

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26 Interview with Karel Dudesek, 14 April 2018.

27 Interview with Wolfgang Bergmann, 3sat, 24 April 2018.

3.6 The Dörnhof meetings

From January onwards, three meetings took place between Ponton and the working group from the Kassel Gesamthochschule at the Jugendhof on the Dörnberg mountain near Kassel to discuss the common television project. The Jugendhof was an educational institution of the Hessian Ministry of Social Affairs, where in the 1970s political film projects were undertaken. Among the speakers invited over the years were left-wing and experimental directors such as Werner Nekes, Dore O., Klaus Wyborny, Kathrin Seybold, Gerd Conrad, Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky; in 1968 the director Adolf Winkelmann founded the left-wing Kassel Film Collective there, whose aim was the "development of media forms of agitation".[28] It was closed in 2000 by the conservative Hessian state government.

The minutes of these meetings document a growing alienation between the project partners. The first meeting took place from 4 to 7 January 1992. On the first evening, the Hamburg and Kassel groups presented their respective concepts. The following day was devoted to the show concept, one morning to a "fundamental discussion of media ideology". The agenda also included discussions on financing, public relations, organisation and the architecture of the studio; one evening the programme included watching an episode of *Mr. Bean* together.

Also in January 1992, Jan Hoet wrote letters to Deutsche Telekom and the Hamburg Cultural Authority in support of Ponton's search for sponsors; both of these companies later became sponsors of the project. These letters also reveal the curator's understanding of the concept: "This experimental television broadcast during documenta is a unique challenge for documenta to connect to modern interactive electronic media and to show the possibilities of a different television – as a medium that can be used by everyone."[29] However, Hoet does not seem to have presented the project at a documenta press conference on 14 January 1992 as there is no mention of it in the press coverage of the event.

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28 "Die Filmarbeit auf dem Jugendhof Dörnberg und die Filme des Kasseler Filmkollektivs. Antworten von Gerhard Büttenbender auf Fragen von Peter Hoffmann", *new filmkritik*, 20 February 2020, https://newfilmkritik.de/archiv/2020-02/die-filmarbeit-auf-dem-jugendhof-doernberg-und-die-filme-des-kasseler-filmkollektivs/

29 Letter from Jan Hoet to the Hamburg Cultural Authority, 24 January 1992.

At this point, conflicts were growing between documenta and Rolf Lobeck, who apparently tried to accommodate the project in an official exhibition space. A letter from Jan Hoet to Lobeck dated 10 December 1991 says:

> To make it clear once again: I do not see this project as an artistic part of documenta IX, but as a possible element within the supporting program. Only under this condition, I agreed to accommodate the project at documenta IX. ... I am somewhat disconcerted that you are seeking to use one of our exhibition buildings without contacting us first ... For me, the location for such projects is the row of pavilions opposite the Fridericianum, the so-called "service area".[30]

In an undated letter, he requested the building authority of the city of Kassel to make the parking lot next to the Fridericianum on Untere Karlsstrasse available to the project, so that the container studio of *Piazza virtuale* could be located there during documenta. A number of avant-garde designs for the studio were drawn up by architects, including a building made of plastic sheeting. However, these ideas proved to be impractical and too expensive, so that the decision was finally in favour of a construction made of 15 containers from the KEKU company in Groß-Gerau.

From 4 to 7 February 1992 there was a second meeting on the Dörnberg, again with a "media-ideological discussion", but also with the agenda item "swimming" for the second day at 23:00.[31] According to the minutes, numerous organisational questions were clarified: at this point, the car park next to the Fridericianum seems to be fixed as a location; now its use is planned, tasks and responsibilities for catering, set-up, technology, sponsor contact, etc. are determined, and the distribution of the budget is also discussed. The minutes also mention additional ideas for the show, most of which were not implemented: "'Jan Hoet speaks to the world', obituaries, endoscope, museum encyclopaedia, body sounds, censorship, voices from beyond, citizenband radio and an apparent transmitter failure.[32]

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30 Letter from Jan Hoet to Rolf Lobeck, 10 December 1992.

31 Agenda, Dörnberg/Kassel, 3 February 1992.

32 It is possible, however, that the Dörnberg document cited, which is dated 1 February 1992, i.e. three days before the start of the meeting, was also a working paper written by the working group in Kassel in preparation for the meeting.

According to the minutes of the meetings, the concept and look of show were still unclear at that time. The minutes state: "Different possibilities of what individual designs could look like are discussed. The idea of a design that encourages or initiates participation emerges."[33] If this note reflects the actual state of preparation, the concept of the show was still unfinished a good four months before documenta began! However, it is possible that Ponton did not want to reveal details about the state of preparations because the group was planning to withdraw from the joint project. On 25 February 1992, a list of questions was sent to a Hamburg lawyer, indicating that such a step was planned. An important part of the list of questions refers to the rights that Lobeck might have acquired to "brand names" such as Van Gogh TV or *Piazza virtuale* through the cooperation. And above all: "What rights does Prof. Lobeck have to the overall concept of *Piazza virtuale*?"[34]

The letter is also a highly interesting document in other respects, posing legal questions that were new at the time. Many of them relate to copyright and the personal rights of viewers who participate in the show: "What text do we have to include in the show at what intervals to inform viewers of their legal situation and to protect ourselves against their claims? [...] Do we have to produce a recording of each broadcast? How long do we have to archive these recordings?"

The group also enquires about patents on touch-tone control, the various methods for showing faxes, mailbox dialogues and videophone recordings on screen, and even on interactive television per se. Questions about advertising show that at that time it was still assumed that the programme would be at least partly financed by advertising. Unfortunately, there is no information about the legal advice the group received in response to its questions. However, references to the viewers' rights were not broadcast in the show, and the group did not seek patents for the technologies developed by Ponton either.

At the next meeting on the Dörnberg, which took place from 6 to 8 March, the conflicts between Ponton and the working group from Kassel broke out in full force. The minutes record not only personal animosities and individual conflicts between the project partners, but also fundamentally different ideas about the show: "Lobeck does not believe in the interactive concept,

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33 Minutes, Dörnberg, Thursday.

34 All quotations from a letter from Van Gogh TV to a Hamburg lawyer, 25 February 1992.

criticises Ponton's concept as too one-sided, too narrow, not local enough in regard to the art concept taking place at documenta."[35] Ponton's representatives complain that the group from Kassel does not adhere to agreements, that the students from the university hardly participated in the preparation and the local connection was missing because of this. A division of the available broadcasting time was considered, Rolf Lobeck resigned from the working group. After further conflicts with Jan Hoet, Lobeck withdrew from the project altogether in April.[36] Together with students from the Gesamthochschule, however, he ran a television project entitled "Let there be TV" in an army tent right next to the Van Gogh TV container studio during documenta.

From the end of April at the latest, the organisation of *Piazza virtuale* was entirely in Ponton's hands. Little can be learned from the available documents about the progress of the technical and content-related preparations. However, there are numerous undated drafts, storyboards and sketches that record work on various modules and formats and indicate concentrated work.
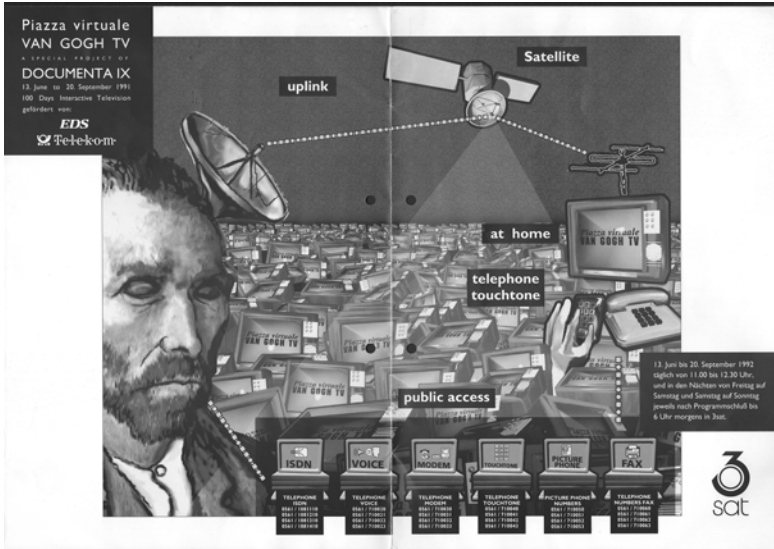
3.7 Public relations and marketing

Press relations and the search for sponsors were being pursued with rigorous determination in the spring of 1992. In one of the *Piazza virtuale* files, there are over 100 letters and faxes to journalists and editors – an indication of how important coverage of the project was as part of Van Gogh TV's media strategy. On some days in May, for example, more than a dozen letters were written and sent. Almost all of them begin with the sentence "As discussed with you on the phone", which indicates that the enclosed press release or invitation was preceded by a personal phone call; at times, these were followed up too, as can be inferred from other letters. Many editorial offices were provided with the trailer of the project on a VHS tape; others only received a press release.

A wide range of media was addressed. TV magazines were contacted, as were technical journals; the local press in Kassel as well as national magazines. There are letters to such diverse publications as the women's magazine

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35 Doernberg final summary, 8 March 1992.

36 Letter from Rolf Lobeck to Jan Hoet, 27 April 1992. According to the letter, Hoet is said, among other things, to have called Lobeck's activities "local shit" and to have thrown an employee of Gesamthochschule Kassel out of the Fridericianum.

Advertising for Piazza virtuale

Petra and the teenage magazine *Popcorn*, the art magazine *Texte zur Kunst* and
the computer magazine *ct*, the national daily *Süddeutsche* and German televi-
sion stations, and also to international media such as the avant-garde Dutch
media magazine *Mediamatic*. Notes from the regularly held "press meetings"
show that personal contacts in editorial offices were systematically sought.

The standard cover letter is occasionally adapted for the medium being
written to and additional information is added to the standard text. For
example, the cover letter to the musician's magazine *Fachblatt* reads:

> This computer-controlled show, designed for audience participation, also
> offers aspects that should be of great interest to musicians and music pro-
> ducers. Upon request, we will be happy to send you a video of 11 minutes in
> length, which gives an introduction to the project in English with two appli-
> cation examples of the *Interactive Orchestra*. Here, viewers can make music
> live with other participants from their homes using the telephone keyboard
> in classical or disco style.[37]

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37 Letter from Christiane Klappert and Ludwig Seyfarth to Udo Weyers, *Fachblatt Musikmag-
    azin*, 13 May 1992.

In publications and interviews, the group repeatedly emphasised that it would not only address the art scene with its work, but all of society: "We are working with a mass medium, and mass media must be popular. In the past, too, artistic ideas were copied commercially, for example in advertising – and not always to their detriment. What is initially shocking or alienating loses its oddity and avant-garde quality through popularisation, but also leads to a broader and thus more differentiated understanding."[38] Hence, the press releases needed to be in accessible language: "Strictly separate generally understandable project presentation and description from theoretical-philosophical background. Do not introduce terms like 'interactivity', 'polylogue' etc. without explanation, avoid any impression of hermetic media, computer or art discourse."[39] Some papers published extensive, programmatic interviews with Van Gogh TV in which the project was presented.[40] A first press conference was held in Hamburg on 6 March 1992, and shortly before the opening of the documenta there was another press conference in Kassel, at which representatives of the most important sponsors such as Telekom and the Austrian Ministry of Culture were present.

Some of the Piazzettas also seem to have conducted their own press work, which led to reports in local newspapers at the locations of these Piazzettas. The intensive press work achieved some significant successes. *Der Spiegel*, *Wiener* and *Prinz* reported extensively on *Piazza virtuale* in advance, and the computer magazines *MacUp* and *Page* published a joint special edition. In total, the final press documentation, put together by 3sat, includes more than 150 articles that were published in Germany and internationally. According to this publication, there were also eight television reports as well as various radio reports.

In order to present itself to the public, Van Gogh TV developed logos that were used on posters, press kits, stationery, business cards and even a T-shirt, almost reminiscent of the "corporate identity" of a company. With this

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38 *Prinz Stadtmonitor*, September 1992, pp. 15f.

39 Press release for the meeting on 11 February 1992.

40 These include: Ohrt, Roberto, "Van Gogh TV: Ein Interview mit den Machern des Documenta-Fernsehens", *Artis*, June 1992, pp. 36–39; Dany, Hans Christian, "Außer Kontrolle: Springer zieht nach A4, Läufer auf D6. Interview mit Karel Dudesek", *Spuren in Kunst und Gesellschaft* no. 39, February 1992, pp. 56–60, Deiniger, Olaf, "Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten des interaktiven Fernsehens: Gespräch mit den 'Van Gogh TV'-Künstlern", *Prinz Stadtmonitor*, September 1992, pp. 15–16.

kind of presentation, the group followed strategies that have been used in art since Fluxus at the latest, and were further developed towards a "business art" in the 1980s and 1990s, for example by the Swiss conceptual artist Res Ingold with his imaginary airlines Ingold Airlines or the artist group etoy.

3.8 Sponsoring

Van Gogh TV predecessor Minus Delta t had already sought sponsors for its elaborate *Bangkok Project*. Ponton and Van Gogh TV were also only able to carry out their work – which typically needed the support of other artists, engineers and programmers and the latest media technology – with the help of corporate sponsors. *Piazza virtuale* would not have been possible without the support of Deutsche Telekom, which provided the group with ISDN video telephones, a fibre link to 3sat in Mainz, a telephone system and a satellite dish. A good part of the hardware used, such as computers or mixing desks, were provided by sponsors as well as the software, where Van Gogh TV often even received new versions in advance, which they tested in use and reported to the producers about their experiences.

However, the fact that a large part of the budget came from private companies does not mean that Van Gogh TV did without the support of public institutions. In the case of *Piazza virtuale*, a large part of the budget came from the Austrian Ministry of Culture, the Governor of Lower Austria, the Senate of Hamburg and the Hessian Ministry of Culture. The names of all these sponsors were mentioned in the credits of the show, on press kits, press releases and other printed materials.

As early as 31 January 1992, Ponton received 2,100,000 schillings (approximately €150,000) from the Austrian state curator Robert Fleck, who was the first sponsor to support the project. In the letter, Fleck also places *Piazza virtuale* in the context of previous documenta projects such as Joseph Beuys' *Free International University*.[41] Although the amount of support was generous and the largest single contribution to the project, it only covered part of the total project costs of *Piazza virtuale*, which ultimately amounted to a good DM700,000 (€358,000). Ponton had to raise these funds entirely on its own, as documenta did not support the project financially. 3sat's contribution was

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41   Fax from Robert Fleck to Karel Dudesek, 31 January 1992.

also very small – originally DM17,000 (around €8000) – considering the station received more than 250 hours of daily programming of a highly original concept over a period of three months. (When Van Gogh TV threatened to stop broadcasting after two months due to lack of money, the station injected another DM12,000.)

Even though not all negotiations with sponsors are recorded in writing in the available documents, the search for financial support must have been intense. In March, several Ponton employees travelled to Hanover to the CeBit computer fair. They followed a precisely timed schedule with appointments at dozens of stands of the various exhibitors, where they showed up with a detailed list of equipment that they hope to receive from these companies as sponsorship.

All in all, the group managed to secure a budget of a good DM500,000 (about €300,000) by the start of broadcasting, although this was not enough for the 100-day broadcast. The most important sponsors included the American IT service company Electronic Data Service (EDS), owned by the American entrepreneur and presidential candidate Ross Perot, which contributed DM100,000 (about €50,000 Euro), and the Federal Office of Culture in Bern, which gave roughly DM36,000 (about €18,000). The city of Hamburg gave a grant of DM50,000, and the Franco-German Youth Office provided €50,000 in support of various workshops during the documenta on topics such as "Virtual/Real World", "Data Communication" and "Electronic Telepresence/Interactive Media". The Soros Foundation contributed $10,000 for the Eastern European Piazzettas. In addition, there were contributions in kind from various sponsors such as Deutsche Telekom, the European Space Agency, Apple, Philips and Commodore. Their total value was stated to be a good 8 million shillings (about €600,000).

Ponton worked hard on a project whose financing had not been secured when broadcasting began and which was generally poorly funded. The salaries paid to the staff for their hard work amounted to DM1200 for the technicians and DM2000–2500 for the administrative staff. The money ran out at the beginning of August and the group had to frantically apply for additional funding from the Hessian Ministry of Culture, the Upper Austrian government and 3sat in order to secure the broadcasting operation until 20 September. Whereas appeals for donations were not allowed on 3sat, this restriction did not exist on the Olympus shows, which in the last weeks of *Piazza virtuale* always ended with a plea for money: "So that we can still make shows tomorrow…"

Mike Hentz at the Piazzaetta in Riga
Photo: Janis Deinarts

3.9 The international Piazzettas

Mike Hentz, who was in charge of the international Piazzettas, completed a frenetic travel marathon across Europe in the first half of 1992. From Hamburg – at times accompanied by the American curator Kathy Rae Hufmann, who coordinated the international Piazzettas, and often under difficult travel conditions – he visited Berlin, Zurich, Geneva, Bern, Vienna, Lyon, Paris, St Petersburg, Ljubljana, Prague, some cities even several times: he travelled a total of four times each to Riga and Moscow, first to prepare, then to collaborate on the Piazzettas there. Not all of these trips were a success: despite three visits to Poland, he did not succeed in finding a partner there. No interested party was found in St Petersburg either, and in Moscow only at the very end of *Piazza virtuale* for three short Piazzettas.

    In many of the Eastern European countries, there were major technical obstacles to overcome during preparation. Sometimes Hentz had to participate in the work on the Piazzetta and therefore was also often travelling during the broadcasting of *Piazzetta virtuale.* His frequent absences led to conflicts within the group. However, one must note that Hentz – thanks to

his international contacts and his organisational and negotiating skills – put together a huge number of international Piazzettas for the project under difficult conditions within a short time and with relatively limited means.

3.10 In Kassel at last

On 24 April 1992, the ISDN connections for videophones were installed in Kassel[42] and, on 15 May, Ponton moved the entire studio, which until then had been installed in the lab in Hamburg, to Kassel; the broadcasting equipment was set up in the containers, which were delivered on 18 May – just under a month before broadcasting began. The Kassel fire brigade had to help with a truck-mounted crane to set up the containers. A list for the insurance company records 368 pieces of equipment used in the studio, from telephones to U-Matic editing suites, from tape recorders to computers, from a "videotypewriter", including a "videoprinter", to an oscilloscope. The finished set-up, however, reminded curator Kathy Rae Hufman more of a "construction site" than an art installation,[43] and Mike Hentz created a series of drawings that – printed on large plastic sheets – were mounted on the façades of the containers when they were delivered by the printer on 10 June.

Various letters from this time document that the project proceeded with great speed. It was only after the containers had been erected on the parking lot next to Fridericianum that documenta officially gave Ponton permission to use the site on 21 May, reminding the group that it must obtain all missing permits itself.[44] (The final building permit was not granted until 20 July, a good month after the exhibition began.[45]) On 11 June, two days before the start of the broadcast, the furniture for the broadcast container arrived (including a bunk bed, two mattresses, five tables, 30 steel chairs, five tables and three cupboards[46]).

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42 Fax from Christiane Klappert to Christian Vanderborght, 24 April 1992.

43 Fax from Kathy Rae Hufman to Mike Hentz, 4 June 1992.

44 Contract between Van Gogh TV and documenta, 21 May 1992.

45 Final issue of a building permit, letter from the Hessian Office for Building Regulations and Monument Preservation to Karel Dudesek, 20 July 1992.

46 Delivery note from the company Schlutz KG, Neuhof, dated 5 June 1992.

Press conference for Piazza virtuale: Benjamin Heidersberger, Karel Dudesek,
Jan Hoet, Robert Fleck, two unknown representatives of the sponsors
and Walter Konrad (from right)
Photo: altschaffel.com

On the same day, the final documenta press conference took place. Again, *Piazza virtuale* was not mentioned; the members of the group were not even given press tickets to attend the opening. Two days later, the mayor of Kassel, together with prominent artist and curator Peter Weibel, inaugurated the studio containers in a short ceremony, and there was a press conference for *Piazza virtuale*. On 13 June, the first show of *Piazza virtuale* went on the air for the first time at 11 a.m. sharp.

Wau Holland of Chaos Computer Club visits Piazza virtuale.
Photo: altschaffel.com