2   Before and after *Piazza virtuale*

Piazza virtuale is part of a perplexing multitude of other works and (media) art groups that preceded the project or developed out of it. These groups and projects will be discussed in this chapter, as *Piazza virtuale* was to a great extent a culmination of practices, approaches and technologies that developed during these earlier activities. In retrospect, these are distinguished by such a single-mindedness and strength of purpose that they can be considered a body of work in their own right, despite their departure from the traditional notion of an artistic oeuvre. After *Piazza virtuale* and the break-up of Van Gogh TV, the founders of the groups went on to form new collectives, some of them art-oriented, but most of them, astonishingly, business enterprises, which will also be discussed in this chapter.

The artistic practice of launching and carrying out collective projects under ever new "brand names" instead of individual artworks can be traced back, on the one hand, to methods introduced into the canon of aesthetic modernism by loose associations of artists such as Dada and Fluxus. On the other hand, this practice also corresponded to a neoliberal form of work organisation and "branding" that corresponded to the emerging internet economy. *Piazza virtuale* was the starting point of further art groups and activities, but it was also from the circle of *Piazza virtuale* organisers that companies emerged which were among the forerunners of the "New Economy" in Germany.

The starting point for all these activities is the artists' group Minus Delta t, founded by Karel Dudesek, Mike Hentz and Chrislo Haas in 1978. Benjamin Heidersberger, who with Peter Elsner had started his own artistic platform, Head Resonance Company, occasionally worked with the group. In 1988 he established Ponton together with Dudesek and Hentz, with Salvatore Vanasco joining the group shortly after. Ponton was responsible for some of the

most daring and experimental (media) art projects of the time from 1988 on-wards under the names Ponton European Media Lab and Van Gogh TV. Work as an artistic collective, which the group exemplified, had been brought into the DNA of the group especially by Mike Hentz through his participation in artists' groups and networks such as Padlt Noidlt, Frigo, Infermental, Code Public and Radio Bellevue.

2.1 Minus Delta t (1978–1988)

Minus Delta t (or -Δ t) was a group that created a barely classifiable form of "life art" on the intersection between the music and the art scene. The group, which had named itself after a mathematical phenomenon, was founded in Zurich in 1978 by Mike Hentz, Chrislo Haas and Karl Dudesek, three artistic autodidacts who had previously been active in the alternative art and music scene.

In its ten years of activities, Hentz and Dudesek formed the core person-nel of the group, joined by almost a dozen other temporary members during its existence. These members included Wolfgang Georgsdorf, Gerard Couty, Malika Ziouech, Gérard Couty, Padeluun and others after Chrislo Haas had left the group to make electronic music with the bands Deutsch-Amerikani-sche Freundschaft (DAF) and Liaisons Dangereuses.

Among the activities that made Minus Delta t well-known in the Ger-man art and music world were performances in the early German punk and new wave scene, such as at the Geräusche für die 80er festival in Hamburg's Markthalle, of which a recording was also released on the new wave label Zick Zack, and at the Shvantz festival at Frankfurt's Städel art school.[1] Pro-vocations and confrontation with the audience were important elements in these performances, and occasionally there were fistfights – as in their performances in the art context. Minus Delta t also released two albums: a double album with recordings made during the *Bangkok Project* (1984) and the triple album *Opera Death* (1987).

Bangkok Project is the best known and most spectacular production of Minus Delta t.[2] The group transported a five-ton stone from Wales to Asia
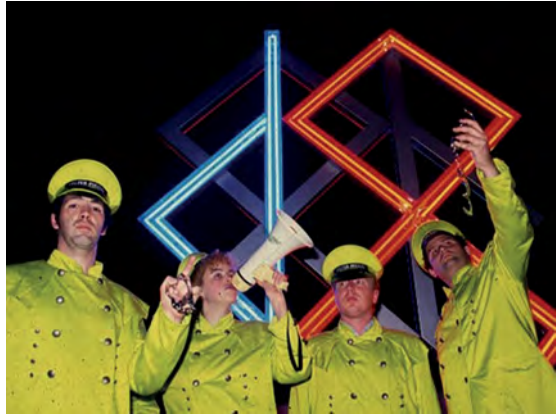
---

1 Hartmann, *Silberne Ameisen.*

2 Minus Delta t Plus, *The Bangkok Project*, Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1984; *Mike Hentz: Works 4.*

Minus Delta t as "Kulturpolizei" (cultural police) at documenta 1987. From left: Mike Hentz, Malika Ziouech, Michael Delta, Karel Dudesek
Photo: Jan Riephoff

Ulrich Leistner and Axel Wirths of German video art distribution company 235 MEDIA work in Minus Delta t´s Media Bus at Documenta 8.
Photo: Minus Delta t

Minus Delta t truck with logos of the sponsors of the Bangkok Project
Photo: Minus Delta t

starting in 1982. The journey passed through Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan and India and ended in 1984 at the Bangkok Festival in the Thai capital. During the journey they had meetings, among others, with the Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, the Fluxus artist Ben Vautier, the Dalai Lama and the Pope, who blessed the stone in the Vatican. Ahead of its time, from today's perspective, was the fact that this "artistic field trip" was partly financed by the sale of *art shares* – long before the crowdfunding and the NFTs (non-fungible tokens) of today, but also before Joseph Beuys financed his action *7000 Eichen* (7000 oaks) in Kassel by selling prints and share certificates.

The *Bangkok Project* was just as much a tour de force as the later *Piazza virtuale*; both of them exceeded the scale of traditional art projects. In order to be able to carry out such elaborate projects, the *Bangkok Project* as well as *Piazza virtuale* sought sponsors to take over these activities.

Minus Delta t was invited several times to the media art festival Ars Electronica in Linz. In 1987, the group was part of the performance programme of documenta – where Beuys' completed *7000 Eichen* was presented after his death – as the *Kulturpolizei* ("cultural police") and helped to organise the performance programme at the Kassel disco in New York. Even if at first glance the body- and action-oriented situational art of Minus Delta t has little in common with the television projects of Van Gogh TV, there are similarities: One of the special features of the work of both groups was that there were always collective activities, frequently with dozens of collaborators and typically involving audience participation.

Minus Delta t already worked with the media available at the time. In the truck of the *Bangkok Project* were film and video cameras and audio equipment to document the journey; the radio reports that they produced for Austrian public station ORF were apparently quite popular. When the group participated at documenta in 1987, computers were available in the group's *Medienbus* (Media bus) in addition to a video and sound studio, where the American mailbox The WELL could be accessed. The *Medienbus* is strongly reminiscent of the container studio in which *Piazza virtuale* was produced. More importantly, the group also ran a pirate station from the bus, which was later legalised as a "sound art" piece. So just as Minus Delta t provided the art show with a radio station and access to BBS, Van Gogh TV brought its own television station to the exhibition five years later.

In retrospect, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact point at which Minus Delta t ended and Van Gogh TV began.[3] When Minus Delta t set up a container studio next to Bruckner House in Linz at Ars Electronia in 1986 under the title *The Project* and produced its own radio shows there, this can be seen as a direct predecessor of *Piazza virtuale*. Another title of this project, *Ponton*, became the name of the umbrella organisation for Van Gogh TV's activities in the following years and that is described below.

2.2 Head Resonance Company (1978–1984)

Head Resonance Company was an interdisciplinary group of artists from Wolfsburg, including visual artist Peter Elsner and Van Gogh TV founder Benjamin Heidersberger, who worked in the fields of architecture, music, performance and installation and were concerned with "exploring the laws of how ideas become reality".[4] With their experimental vocal music the group was part of the early cassette scene, publishing at Werner Pieper's Transmitter label and Molto Menz "Cassetten und Zeitvertreib". The group was invited to the Grosse Preis at Ars Electronia in 1982, where they performed an automated and interactive communication setup with the audience, including a robot camera. The worldwide distribution of the pentatonic Solar Powered Random Sound Generator (SPRSG) was planned for Ars Electronia in 1984 but never happened because the group dissolved.

2.3 The Project (1986)

In 1986, Minus Delta t carried out an action at Ars Electronia entitled *The Project*, in which the French artist collectives Frigo,[5] Radio Bellevue[6] and Code Public were also involved. In addition to a live concert by Minus Delta t (where a chicken was slaughtered on an open stage), it included a "Container City",

---

3 Vogel, Sabine, "Interview mit Minus Delta t in Lenins Arbeitszimmer", *Kunstforum International* 103, 1989, pp. 115–119.

4 http://headresonance.kulturserver.de

5   http://frigocosmos.com/

6 http://frigocosmos.com/fr/radio-bellevue-web/

Minus Delta t
at Ars Electronica 1986 in
Linz: the container studio
next to Bruckner Haus,
inside the studio and party
 Photos: Minus Delta t

a media studio made of containers, which was set up next to Bruckner House in Linz and which already bore a resemblance to the container studio of *Piazza virtuale* in Kassel next to the Fridericianum at documenta for *Piazza virtuale*. The members of the group produced a radio show, but it was not broadcast.

The festival programme booklet has this to say about their contribution "Austria Picture":

> Minus Delta t travels through Austria by car with car phone, video equipment, digitiser, computer and telephone modem, sends pictures about every hour and daily reports (partly live) to Linz and can be followed through Austria during the entire Ars Electronia. The images are received in one of the containers, immediately appear on the monitor (slowscan) and are printed out. *Frigo* complements the video programme. Daily reports, interviews, sounds and music that they pick up along the way. The radio aesthetic is shaped by *Radio Bellevue*. Documentary, art, reportage, education, living space, cuddle bench, meeting place and functional hitec [sic!].[7]

According to the festival's catalogue, a "new image transmission system was used that requires only a fraction of the previous transmission time and carries television images via telephone as far as desired".[8] The transmission system, that worked similarly to the Slow Scan transmissions that were used at *Piazza virtuale*, was SSPZ by the Austrian company Morocutti.

The subject matter of "Austria Picture" is described in the catalogue as follows:

> The most obvious motifs would be pictures that Austria has of itself (how Austria sees itself); in principle, everything that is characteristic is possible, but the Spanish Riding School, the Golden Roof, the Lindwurm, Lake Neusiedl, the Sacher cake and the horse flood are sights and only have to appear for rough orientation in the sequence of constantly transmitted pictures.[9]

---

7 Ars Electronia programme booklet 1987, p. 12, https://archive.aec.at/media/assets/800692 dce23ba9aedee4781b12277b74.pdf

8 *Ars Electronia catalogue 1986*, Linz: Linzer Veranstaltungsgesellschaft mbH, 1986, unpaginated, https://archive.aec.at/media/assets/bfff142945f8ce2e516adc538af5c210.pdf

9 Ibid.

Above all, everyday pictures from Austria should be included:

> Ice skaters in a circle, music band from a wedding, funeral procession or anni-
> versary, swimming pool, a topless woman and a woman in a swimming cos-
> tume, a family at the swimming pool eating schnitzel with potato salad, the
> portrait of the life-guard, self-service petrol station: a travelling salesman
> draws petrol, Montezuma's crown of feathers in the Ethnological Museum.
> And which of the pictures could just as well come from another part of Cen-
> tral Europe – if not the world? Or are there distinctive images from Austria
> through which Austria has not yet represented itself?[10]

As with the video archive of Minus Delta t, which is described below, the
goal was to document quotidian life and folklore of contemporary Austria,
an approach that in part was also behind the Piazzettas of *Piazza virtuale*.
The printouts of the video images were shown in Bruckner House under the
title "Installation Archive Europe Archive Asia", together with videos from
the group's archive.

2.4 Archive Europa/Asia Projekt/Project Archive/European Mobile Media Art Project (ongoing since 1986)

Already in the *Bangkok Project* of Minus Delta t, documenting the trip on film
and video had played an important role; the group had video cameras to
record the journey and did radio shows that described the progress of the
project for Austrian radio. Video was also always used in the various travel
projects that followed. Some of this material was used in installations and
also in the first television projects. For example, in the programme booklet of
the 1986Ars Electronica, as a contribution by Minus Delta t, there is mention
of "installation *Archive Europe Archive Asia*", about which it says: "According to
two installations on the subject in the foyer of Brucknerhaus, where video
material from the *Bangkok Project* and other trips was shown."[11]

    Republic TV (or *Re-Publik-TV*), which took place at Ars Electronica in 1989,
again used video material from the artists' travels. In issue 103 of German

---

10 Ibid.

11 Programme booklet of Ars Electronia 1986, p. 12.

art magazine *Kunstforum*, which appeared in September 1989 and served as a kind of catalogue for Ars Electronica, three pages are devoted to "Perestroika – Vodka – Pravda TV".[12] This documented the "Van Gogh TV Tour in Eastern Europe, May, June, July 1989", which passed through the GDR, Poland, the USSR, CSSR, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Austria just a few weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some of the contacts made during this trip later proved useful for the preparation of *Piazza virtuale*.

In the same issue of *Kunstforum*, a piece about Ponton's European Mobile Media Art Project says: "The base team generates, collects or produces broadcast material. Ponton manages the material and centralises, archives it (sound/image). The tapes are freely available to the base team, so the material can be edited individually, so a wide variety of films can be made from the same tape material."[13] This seems to accurately describe the work with video material that both Minus Delta t and Ponton/Van Gogh TV cultivated: the recordings were rather raw material for installations, presentations and broadcasts, not the orderly and well-conceived archive that the various names suggested. After *Republik TV*, Van Gogh TV no longer relied on its own video recordings for the television projects. The technology was now so advanced that in the following projects – *Hotel Pompino*, *Piazza virtuale* and *Service area a.i.* – all of the broadcast material could be created live, which was more in line with the group's artistic concept, developed out of performance art.

2.5 Junge Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Kunst und Medientechnologie e.V. Hamburg (Young Society for the Promotion of Art and Media Technology e.V. Hamburg) (1988)

The Junge Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Kunst und Medientechnologie e.V. Hamburg (Young Society for the Promotion of Art and Media Technology e.V. Hamburg) is listed in the credits of all *Piazza virtuale* broadcasts as the production company. The association was founded in 1988 by Salvatore Vanasco, Mike Hentz, Benjamin Heidersberger and Karel Dudesek in order to be able

---

12 Kunst- und Unterhaltungskombinat (KUK), "Perestroika – Vodka – Prawda TV", *Kunstforum* 103, 1989, pp. 120–123.

13 "Ponton European Mobile Media Art Project", *Kunstforum* 103, 1989, pp. 110–114.

to take advantage of its "Eingetragener Verein (e.V.)" status (registered voluntary association). This confers many legal benefits, such as the right to apply for the status of a charitable organization (*Gemeinnützigkeit*). Most likely for similar purposes, a Verein zur Förderung des interaktiven Fernsehens e.V. (Association for the Promotion of Interactive Television) was set up first in Hamburg and then in Hanover in the following years.

This Verein was founded after all the group members had taken up permanent residence in Hamburg, whereas previously they had moved between different cities, including Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Wolfsburg, Berlin, Vienna and Zurich. Not only for *Piazza virtuale*, but also on other occasions, the Verein received public funding, to which a commercial entity would not have been entitled. In contrast, Ponton was organised as a Gesellschaft bürgerlichen Rechts (public partnership).

2.6 Ponton (since 1986)

(Also: PONTON European Mobile Art Project,
Ponton Media Lab, Ponton Media)

Minus Delta t carried out its first large-scale media project, *Ponton*, at Ars Electronica 1986. The name was then printed on the Medienbus that Minus Delta t presented at documenta 1987, shortly after at the Frankfurt book fair in the same year and also at the opening of the Alte Oper (Old Opera) in Frankfurt. Ponton then appeared in 1988 in the catalogue of the European Media Art Festival (EMAF) in Osnabrück as the name of the media art group that had developed from Minus Delta t. The PONTON European Mobile Art Project was now a team that, according to the catalogue, included Mike Hentz. Benjamin Heidersberger, Karel Dudesek, Gerard Couty and Axel Wirths from 235 Media. The group took part in several programmes. But most importantly, they broadcast from their *Medienbus* without permission. Their pirate TV station partly showed video recordings from the *Bangkok Project* and partly of video art by other artists. For this they used a transmitter that the Amsterdam television group Rabotnik TV had built for them.

The catalogue contains programmatic statements that already foreshadow the aesthetics of Van Gogh TV: "No fixed programming, no news programmes, nearly no censorship, the principle of coincidence, our own advertising design, self-determined, local station with international stan-

Inside Ponton´s media lab in Hamburg, Ole Lütjens
and Christian Wolff in the background
Photo: altschaffel.com

dards."[14] However, the emphasis here is still on working with their own video recordings, not with live material: "From visual and acoustic experiments, collages and mixes, the perceiver associates his own world. On the basis of pre-produced broadcasts, programmes are created through revision and live intervention that also take into account coincidences and moods. With a time limit already included in the concept, we prevent routine and bureaucratic culture."[15]

In the tradition of media activists, the primacy of practice is emphasised: "There is no substitute for practical experience of one's own allotment garden."[16] In addition, the idea of using a satellite to broadcast the material is mentioned for the first time in this text.

---

14 "Ponton European Mobile Art Projekt", in Allerdisse, Heike (ed.), *Katalog Europäisches Medienkunst Festival*, Osnabrück 1988, pp. 306–307, http://2016.emaf.de/emaf.de/_emaf/ www.emaf.de/1988/ponton.html

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

The pirate TV broadcast caused a minor scandal in Osnabrück. In order to avoid legal trouble, the members of Ponton claimed that these broadcasts came from a Dutch group of media activists. (In the squatter scene in Amsterdam and Rotterdam at that time, there were numerous pirate radio stations and also experiments with illegal television stations; in addition, numerous political and artistic groups were broadcasting on the Amsterdam Open Channel, so this claim had a certain plausibility.) The alleged name of this group was Van Gogh TV. Although this name does not appear anywhere in the festival catalogue, Van Gogh TV was thus launched in the German media art scene through this provocative action.

2.7 Van Gogh TV (1988–1994)

In 1989 Ponton in Hamburg moved into rooms in a former machine factory in the St Georg district near the main railway station in Koppel Street. Koppel 66, which still exists today, was established in 1981 on the initiative of artists as a "Haus for Kunst und Handwerk" (House for Arts and Crafts), with studios and workshops. Here, a number of projects were organized by Ponton under the moniker Van Gogh TV.

The literary scholar, filmmaker and writer Klaus Peter Dencker, who was senior director of the Hamburg Department of Culture from 1985 to 2002, wanted to support electronic media in the print media city of Hamburg, following the example of the MedienPark in Cologne, the Städel Schule in Frankfurt (which had introduced an Institute for New Media in 1987 with Peter Weibel as director) and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe. To this end, he set up the working group Kunst und Technologie (Art and Technology) and the media conference Interface and supported media initiatives such as Van Gogh TV with project funds. He also facilitated Van Gogh TV renting generous premises for its media lab at Koppel 66, which was originally intended for traditional artists and artisans.

The group now had its own space for the first time; the four founders – Mike Hentz, Karel Dudesek, Benjamin Heidersberger and Salvatore Vanasco – now had a place where they could experiment with the equipment they had successively built up during previous projects and with their editing studio Low-Band Society that Heidersberger and Dudesek had started.

Because Mike Hentz was at that time visiting professor at the Hochschule für bildenden Künste (HfbK), where Salvatore Vanasco worked as an assistant, there was also a connection to the city's art academy that was significant for the project's offshoot, Universcity TV. Even though direct contacts do not seem to have played a major role, the fact that the computer art pioneer Kurd Alsleben and telecommunication art expert Matthias Lehnhardt taught at HfbK also played a role in this context – especially for the members of the feminist artist group Frauen und Technik, who ran the Hamburg Piazzetta at *Piazza virtuale*.

Ponton's Lab quickly developed into a great attraction not only for those interested in media art, but also for geeks and hackers, some of them from the German hacker association Chaos Computer Club. The video equipment and computers of all brands popular at the time, as well as access to the internet and a BBS attracted people interested in the creative use of media technology. Some of them returned the favour of using the technology by helping out with programming or computer graphics. Mike Hentz explains:

Video shooting at Ponton´s media lab in Hamburg,
Ole Lütjens and Salvatore Vanasco
Photo: altschaffel.com

> With a working day of fourteen hours (and more), minimal budgets for pro-jects and about thirty collaborators, an annual budget of 1,000,000 would have been more appropriate to achieve what in fact we have achieved ... So it was not possible for us to pay social insurances or other normal obligati-ons for our working staff. At the same time we were not a company but a non-commercial association. At the beginning a fee of DM500 was paid per month for each co-worker. For projects outside of Hamburg accommodation and food were paid for.[17]

The trade magazine *Mac News* described the lab:

> When you enter the headquarters of the internationally networked and ope-rating organisation, you leave your everyday life in West Germany and begin to be amazed. Garage and basement-like rooms house an immense number of glowing monitors, Cape Kennedy-like, and computers of almost all worlds, between which people run around, pulling cables, soldering hardware, cut-ting videos, writing programmes, making coffee. ... It looks like the futuristic world of the Max Headroom films, not quite so TV chic and sophisticated, but real – real future, which has been emerging for two years in this kind of me-dia garage.[18]

Many of the people who worked on the projects *Re-Publik-TV* (1989) and *Hotel Pompino* (1990) at Ars Electronica, on *Piazza virtuale* (1992) at documenta and on *Service Area* (1994) again at Ars Electronica came from this scene. Some of them were later employees in the various companies that developed out of Ponton/Van Gogh TV. The space at Koppel was used by Ponton until 1993, after which the group split up: Mike Hentz had left the group after *Piazza virtuale* in order to focus on his own art. A mutual statement gives 22 January 1993 as the date of his departure.

In 1993, Ponton European Media Art Lab received the Media Art Prize awarded by Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe and Siemens for *Piazza virtuale* and won an "Honorary Mention" at the Prix Ars Electronica.

---

17 *Mike Hentz Works 4*.

18 "Binärer Bilderofen", *Mac News* 9, 1992.

2.8 *Republic TV* (1989)

After *The Project* by Minus Delta t, which took place at Ars electronica in 1986, *Republic TV* was the second time that a container studio was set up at Ars Electronica – now under the name "Ponton". This time, the group wanted to do live television, which was to be broadcast over an unused service channel of the cable television provider LIWET in Upper Austria for 24 hours on one day, thus reaching 70,000 viewers. However, due to the legal situation at the time, this would have required the permission of the public broadcaster ORF – which was refused in order not to create a precedent for the infringement of its broadcasting monopoly.

Ponton complained in a telegram from Moscow to Federal Chancellor Vranitzky, the local press reported, and there was even a rumour that the group would set up a pirate radio station during Ars Electronica, as they had at the European Media Art Festival in Osnabrück the previous year. Eventually Thaddäus Podgorski, chairman of ORF, offered the group broadcasting time on the new cultural public cable channel 3sat, a joint project of ORF, ZDF and Swiss television channel SRF. This is how Ponton first got in touch with 3sat, which later also broadcast the Ponton productions *Hotel Pompino* (1990), *Piazza virtuale* (1992) and *Service Area a.i.* (1994).

On five dates, between 0:00 and 3:00 a.m., Ponton was thus able to broadcast a live show that included talks, sketches and performances from the Container Studio and Bruckner House. Some of the segments of the show ridiculed popular television formats such as game or talk shows, while others showed spontaneous conversations among artists and Ars Electronia participants. The audience was encouraged to call in during some parts of the show, and mailbox chats were occasionally inserted – all elements that would re-emerge in *Piazza virtuale*.

2.9 Hotel Pompino (1990)

Hotel Pompino was an elaborate television project carried out by Ponton at Ars Electronia in Linz in the year after Republic TV. It was broadcast at night for a week on the public television channel 3sat and Australian public broadcaster ORF. In a kind of interactive television play, viewers were able to guide the actors on camera through a virtual, computer-generated hotel by
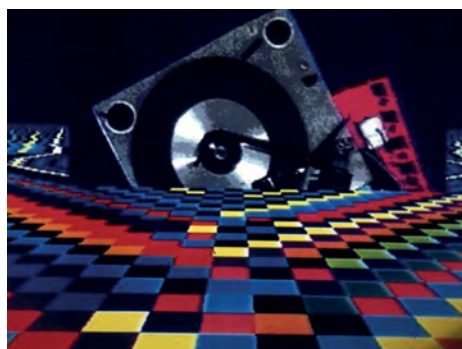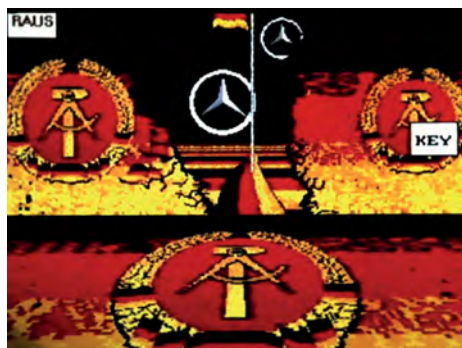
Screenshots from Hotel Pompino

telephone. For this, Ponton developed a complete digital studio on the basis of the home computers that were commercially available at the time. The virtual studio was quite possibly the first of its kind in Europe. The actors stood in front of a blue screen on which the 44 rooms of the virtual hotel were displayed.

In each show, several candidates played against each other. They competed for points, which were awarded by an invisible jury according to highly arbitrary rules. The main prize was free airtime the next day. The candidates could use this time to air their own ideas and could also use the technical possibilities of the studio. The loser ended up in a computer-animated rubbish chute, which was the end of their participation in the game.

Some of the elements of *Hotel Pompino* reappeared in *Piazza virtuale*, for example the use of videophones and computer mailbox. In the Ars Electronia catalogue, Ponton's work to date is presented in a detailed, richly illustrated section. From the catalogue essay:

> Europe is invited to join the game! The game *Hotel Pompino* was developed as a consequence of the live television projects of Van Gogh TV in order to communicate even more directly with the viewer, who now becomes a player. Participation can take place either by appearing in person, by telephone, by videophone or by mailboxes … Cable or satellite dish bring the 3sat broadcast image into the living room of the viewer, who only in this way becomes a co-player. Videophones installed by Ponton are located all over Europe; viewers use them to tune in live as jurors or commentators. In mailboxes, computer users communicate via telephone lines, through which the spectator can participate in the game in writing … The connection from the local to the world takes place through the network (telephone, picturephone, mailbox, news ticker).[19]

Even if the claims made are somewhat exaggerated (for example, there were no videophones anywhere in Europe), this description shows the premium that the group put on audience participation even before *Piazza virtuale*. However, this participation also led to a serious conflict with Ars Electronia,

---

19 "Projekt Pompino: Fernsehen zum Mitspielen", in Hattinger, Gottfried; Weibel, Peter (eds.), *Ars Electronia 1989 catalogue*, vol 1: *Digitale Träume*, Linz: Veritas, 1989, pp. 159–197, at 161, https://archive.aec.at/media/assets/9697fc86c5a25f501bedd6cd157816b5.pdf

Studio of Hotel Pompino at Ars Electronica: Karel Dudesek, Salvatore Vanasco,
Mike Hentz, Florian Eckert, Angela Primbs, Ulrike Gabriel (from left)
Photo: altschaffel.com

when one caller insulted German Chancellor Helmuth Kohl live on air. The
festival would not invite Ponton back for a follow-up project the following
year, which is why the group had to look for another opportunity for its tele-
vision projects; this they found at documenta. As a consequence of the scan-
dal, 3sat agreed to broadcast *Piazza virtuale* only under the condition that one
of the staffers screened the calls for obscenities and political propaganda.

2.10 Universcity TV (1990–1994) (also Universcity TV Europe)

Universcity TV was a project by Ponton to develop new possibilities for the
artistic use of electronic media.[20] According to a statute drawn up at a Ham-
burg notary's office on 11 May 1993, the purpose was to carry out "artistic
projects in Europe, especially with pupils, students and trainees in the field
of new media. The association shall also organise projects and exhibitions in
Europe and rent or acquire appropriate facilities. The association is a cultu-

---

20   Hattinger; Weibel (eds.), *Ars Electronia 1989 catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 198–201

ral institution that is especially intended to compensate for the horrendous deficit in aesthetic education that has arisen in schools".

The statutes not only emphasise the international character of Universcity TV, but also the aspect of training: "Each project realised by Universcity TV must consist of 50 per cent trainees. 50 per cent of all participants must be foreigners in accordance with the country in which the respective project is realised". Possible forms of events are "international media events, symposia and publication of documentation". Christian Vanderborght, Baiba Ripa and Philippe Coeytaux, three organisers of Piazzettas during *Piazza virtuale*, were elected to the board. The statutes repeatedly emphasise the separation between Ponton and Universcity TV; the latter seems to have been primarily a project of Mike Hentz and Salvatore Vanasco.

Universcity TV's first, larger action took place in November 1990 during the Interface conference in Hamburg. Here the group, which included a number of students from the Hochschule für bildende Künste, created an installation for the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, where the conference was held. It also organised its own symposium and broadcast programmes on Offener Kanal Hamburg (the local open-access channel) where viewers could call in.[21] Such interactive television formats were also tried out in follow-up events. Some of the participants – such as Christian Wolff, Ole Lütjens, Silke Mauritius, Axel Roselius and Katharina Baumann – later collaborated on *Piazza virtuale* in Kassel; others – such as Janine Sack, Hans Wermelinger or Ronald Gonko – set up Piazzettas in their home cities. During *Piazza virtuale*, Universcity TV participants from various European countries were invited to Kassel.

---

21 Knoll, Corinna; Lammert, Oliver; Phroehlich, Christof, Universcity TV, Hamburg 1991 (Universcity TV Headquarter/PONTON European Media Art Lab), http://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/universcity-tv.pdf

2.11 *Ballroom TV* (1991)

In the Berlin club 90 Grad, performances took place alongside DJ sets, which were broadcast live via the local station FAB. The audience in front of the screens could tune into the broadcast via telephone or modem. In addition, videophones were installed at various locations in Berlin so that people could connect directly to the club. The project describes itself as follows:

> *Ballroom TV* was the first interactive media event that offered disco visitors and spectators a common communication platform. The disco was a place of collective media noise. The live mix of all available channels became a multimedia thunderstorm that overwhelmed the senses. The computer-generated images and local reality were woven into a multimedia fabric that allowed individual presentation through the means of interaction, communication and transmission.[22]

The show is an example of the frequent connection to music and club culture of Ponton's work. Some of the ideas from *Ballroom TV* – such as the use of computer chat or cameras that streamed live footage – reappeared in *Piazza virtuale*.

## 2.12 *Piazza virtuale* Japan/NHK (1993)

In 1993, NHK, Japan's largest television broadcaster, held the three-day interactive television art experiment SIM TV.[23] Most of the participants were Japanese artists; Ponton European Media Art Lab was the only European group invited to present a revised new edition of *Piazza virtuale* in Tokyo. *Interactive Orchestra*, *Coffeehouse* and *Atelier* were technically updated and adapted to the Japanese script. As in Germany, there were hundreds of thousands of dial-up attempts when the show was on TV.

---

22 Undated concept paper.

23 https://scarabaeus.org/www.ponton.de/archive/archive_japan.html
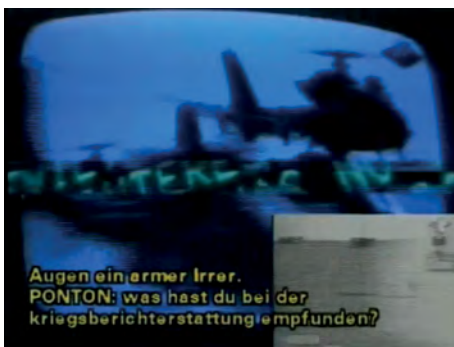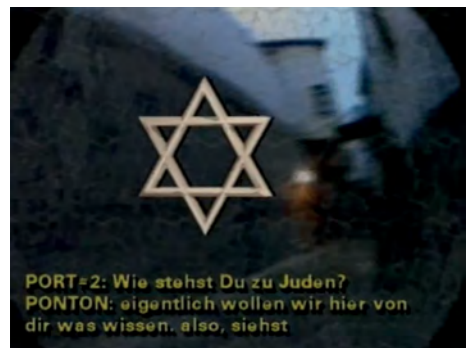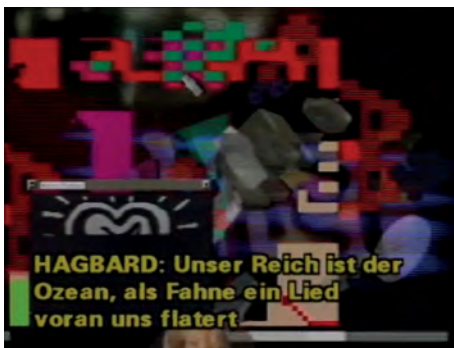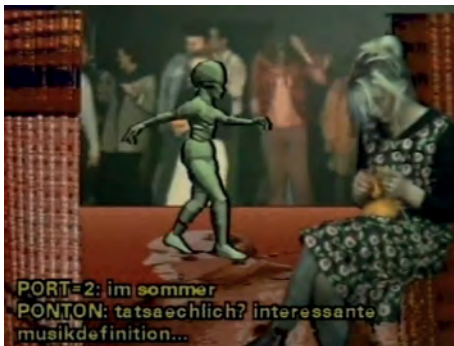
Screenshots from Ballroom TV
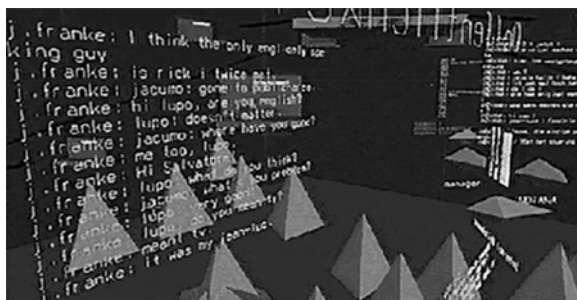
Screenshot Service Area a. i.

2.13 Service Area a.i. (1994)

Two diagrams of Service Area I. a. *Service area a.i.*, which was presented as an installation at the Ars Electronia in Bruckner House in Linz in 1994 and was broadcast on television by 3sat, the kind of communication that took place by telephone at *Piazza virtuale* was transferred to a three-dimensional virtual space on the internet – the first time the group used the new medium. "Cafés and marketplaces are public places of communication culture, yet today's society is characterised by the loss of public space", reads the description of the project. "*Service area a.i.* is the installation of a virtual telematic world that provides multimedia access to many participants from their homes using their computers. ... Visitors can enter cyberspace live and during their visit not only follow events but actively participate in what is happening."[24]

In order to participate, the audience had to install software on their computer that showed the participants as geometric avatars in a virtual, three-dimensional space on the screen using the Virtual Reality Mark-Up Language (VRML). The expressions and movements of these avatars were also transmitted to Linz. The presenters of the show, who interacted with the audience, included Italian writer Nanni Balestrini, MTV host Steve Blame, philosopher Boris Groys, DJ WestBam and singer Blixa Bargeld from the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten. Three times a day, short segments were broadcast on the 3sat programme in which the presenters "reported" from the virtual world on live TV.

---

24 https://scarabaeus.org/www.ponton.de/archive/archive_area.html
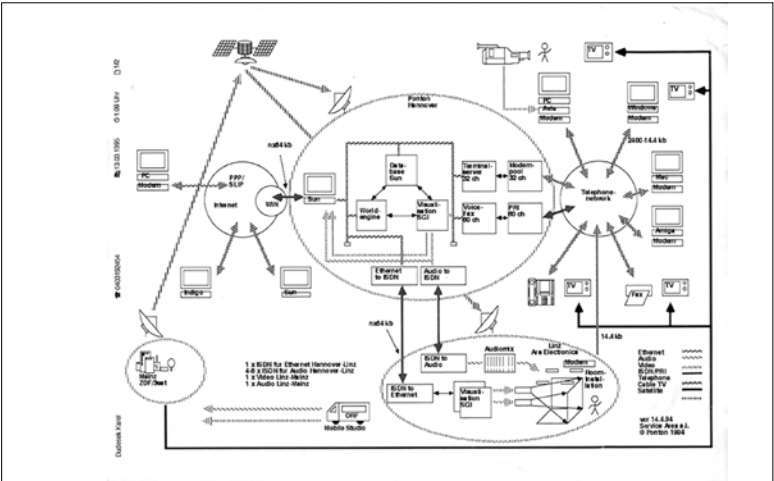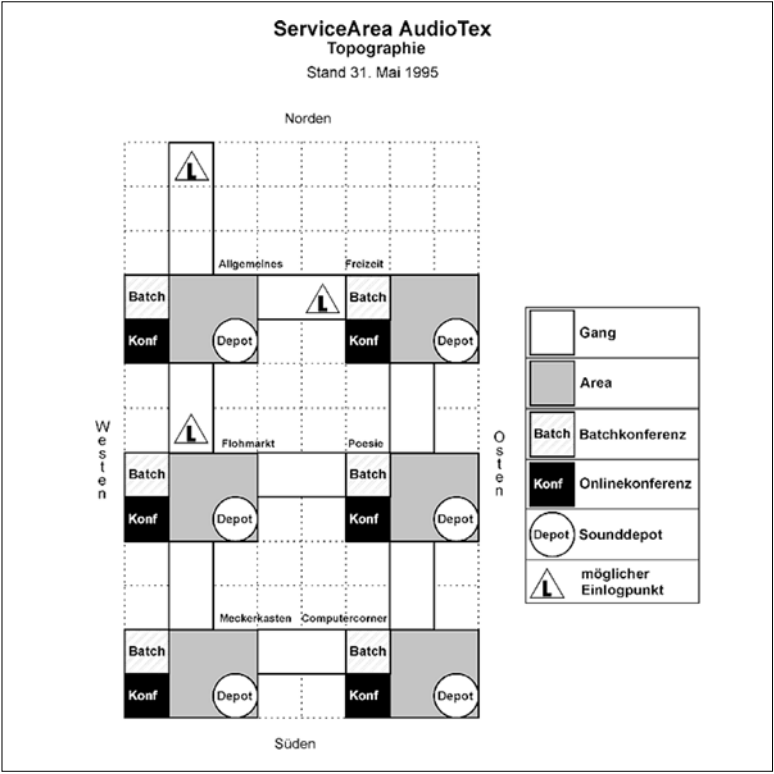
Two diagrams of Service Area i. a.

2.14 Ponton European Media Art Lab (since 1994)

Because the federal state of Niedersachsen Saxony offered to support Ponton as a technology company, Benjamin Heidersberger, Karel Dudesek, Salvatore Vanasco, Frank Matthäi and some staff members such as Ole Lütjens, Christian Wolff, Daniel Haude, Katharina Baumann, Michael Ulrich and Jendo Neversil, who had already been involved in *Piazza virtuale*, moved the Ponton European Media Lab from Hamburg to Hanover. What had started out as an artists' collective became a commercial enterprise in 1994. It was a full-service multimedia agency with 20 employees, and various television programmes with a virtual studio and audience participation were created in Hanover. The company's website said at the time: "The fields of activity range from interface design, development of applications, designs of interactive networks, experiments with digital television, hardware and software developments to practical broadcasting."

Among the television shows developed by Ponton in Hanover was the pilot *Cafe Deutschland* for 3sat and *Nachtfieber* (Night fever) for SWF3, which was clearly influenced by the interaction possibilities via telephone, mailbox and fax at *Piazza virtuale*. But there was now also a virtual version of the place where the programme was filmed, designed with the then common 3D format VRML, which could be "visited" via the internet. This online space was reminiscent of the virtual sets in *Hotel Pompino*, while the way in which the virtual space interacted with the physical space was reminiscent of *Service area i.a.* A virtual studio à la *Hotel Pompino* was also used for *Cafe Deutschland*. Benjamin Heidersberger developed a device for the company called AVIS, which converted video signals into a serial data stream that could be transmitted by a modem over the internet. This device was sold commercially.

Later, websites such as www.niedersachsen.de for the state government or www.deutschland.de for the Federal Press Office and later the Foreign Office were also created, as well as the online arts community kulturserver. de, which still exists today. In 1995, under pressure from the other founders, Karel Dudesek left the company with some of the staff to develop the early 3D online environment *Worlds Within* under the name Van Gogh TV. Salvatore Vanasco built up a subsidiary in Hamburg, which split from the company in Hanover and became its own *Aktiengesellschaft* (public limited company) Ponton AG in 1999.

2.15 Ponton Holding (since 1999)

First Ponton GmbH, from which Ponton Hamburg GmbH emerged, was founded in 1996. Initially, the company worked in partnership with Ponton Media Art Lab in Hanover on joint projects such as the experimental, virtual school platform Comenius, commissioned by the German ministries of education and Telekom, whose design was inspired by the Van Gogh TV project *Service Area i.a.* Ponton in Hamburg took over most of the technical implementation.

In Hamburg, under the name Ponton AG, from 1999 onwards Salvatore Vanasco, as managing director, built up a technology and software company that still exists today. The holding included subsidiaries that specialised in software development, management consultancy and interactive media. Frank Matthäi, who was already responsible for bookkeeping at *Piazza virtuale*, became the company's commercial director.

The company worked for magazines such as *Spiegel* and *Bravo* and for publishing houses such as Dumont, Springer and Gruner und Jahr, but also for companies such as Preussag. Besides internet and media applications, Ponton Holding, which at one point had 400 employees and several subsidiaries, also developed applications and software in the fields of energy, logistics and ecommerce. Vanasco left the company in 2001 and started the IT company Xailabs in Berlin in 2006. Today, Ponton AG specialises entirely in the business-to-business sector.

2.16 Xailabs (since 2006)

The company Xailabs, which Van Gogh TV's co-founder Salvatore Vanasco started and still runs today, "conducts research at the interface between humans and technology", according to the company's website. This includes the application of artificial intelligence in everyday life, the connection of digital and real spaces and the use of sensors. Its products include apps, enterprise portals, content management systems, exhibition design and games; among its customers are companies such as the Bundesbank, Telekom, McDonalds, Daimler, Nike and the Berlin hospital Charité. With the development of avatars, virtual reality environments and the live production studio Third Nature, the company continues to pursue approaches to the design of reactive, virtual

spaces, a "telematic stage", which can be traced back to the virtual studio at *Hotel Pompino* and the connection of virtual and physical space at *Service area a.i.*

From today's perspective, it is striking how many similarities the company's self-description has with that of Ponton European Media Lab. For example, Ponton stated:

> The work of the Ponton European Media Art Lab is procedural: the prototypes developed are designed to constantly change and evolve through their use. This process generates experiential set-ups that allow conclusions about development possibilities for the information society. The technology merely functions as a means of communication in an electronic public space that is created in the networks. In the centre of the work is the human being.

The Xailabs website today says: "Xailabs researches at the interface between people and technology. This is how we discover needs, effects and market capabilities." This orientation towards the user and the process of technical development also shapes the corporate concept at Xailabs and shows how the concepts of Ponton and Van Gogh TV continue to have an impact into the present.

2.17 Van Gogh TeleVision Inc./*Worlds Within* (1995–1999)

Karel Dudesek left Ponton European Media Lab in 1995 due to disagreements with the other directors; the company in Hanover was continued by Salvatore Vanasco, Frank Mattäi and Benjamin Heidersberger, while Van Gogh TV was continued by Dudesek. In Meckelfeld, near Hamburg, he opened a research lab for 3D technologies on the web, where some *Piazza virtuale* staffers such as Tim Becker, Axel Roselius, Martin Schmitz and Manuel Tessloff also worked and developed the online 3D world *Worlds Within* based on VRML.

Worlds Within was a multi-user system based on client-server technology. From today's perspective, the project is reminiscent of Massively Multiplayer Online Games or games like *Minecraft* or *Fortnight*, where the player installs software on their own computer, which they can then use to move around in a virtual, three-dimensional space. *Worlds Within* was not a game, however, but was intended to allow participants to form interest groups and communicate in virtual space, a further development of the concepts of *Piazza virtuale* and *Service Area a.i.* for the internet. A modular system allowed participants to design their own avatar and build their own spaces, as in many online games today.
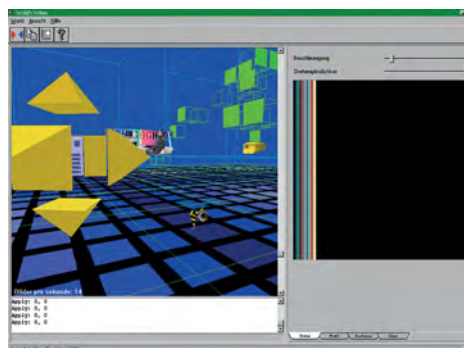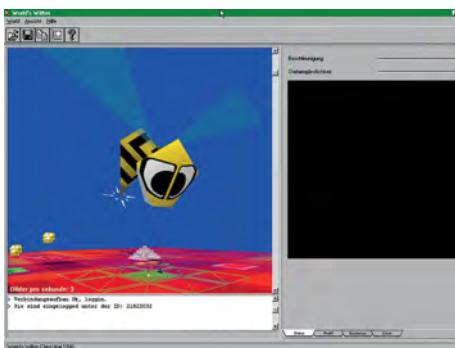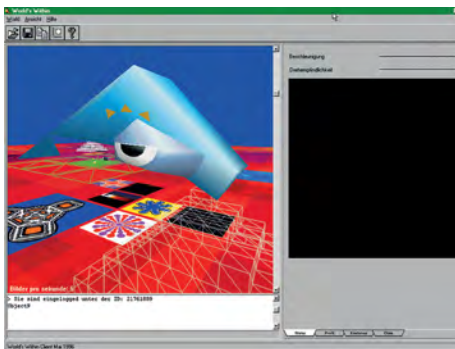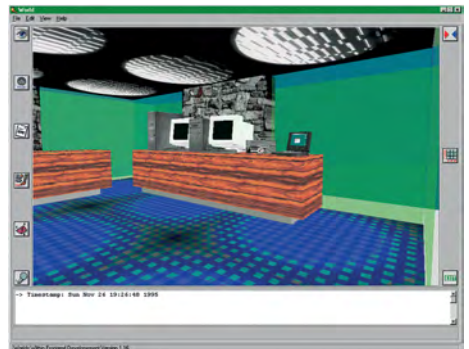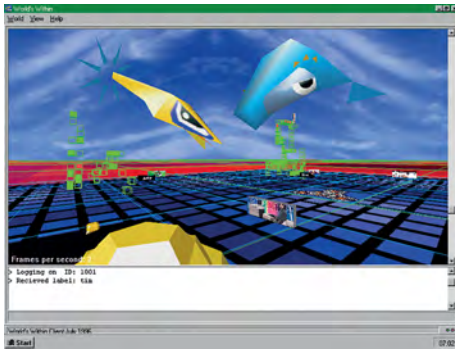
Screenshots Worlds Within

In 1996, the group took part in the Art Olympics during the Olympic Games in Atlanta with an interactive media project; the company appeared as a corporation in the city's commercial register. Van Gogh TeleVision Inc., as the company was now called, negotiated a cooperative agreement with NBC, AT&T and Bell Laboratories in 1996 for an American-wide distributed server system with a three-dimensional world, avatars and multimedia communication. Due to the Telecommunication Act of 1996, AT&T's priorities changed and the project was cancelled. AT&T was forcibly split into several companies by the US government. Van Gogh TeleVision Inc. ceased all activities and was dissolved in the USA and Germany in 1999.

2.18 *Club Automatique* (2000–2002)

French artist David Dronet has described *Club Automatique*, in which he himself was involved, as "a kind of party with content".[25] Other members of the group were Van Gogh TV member and *Piazza virtuale* organizer Mike Hentz, as well as former participants in *Piazza virtuale* Gérard Couty, Rotraut Pape and Jacques Bigot, joined by Christopher Müller and Michel Piet. Three events, which could last up to 12 hours, merged party, food, performances, music and video. The first event took place in 1997 as part of the Ostranenie festival in Dessau, where Piazzetta Ljubliana organiser Marko Košnik, Christian Graupner and Monika Glahn were involved. Other shows took place in Slovenia as guests of the hEXPO festival in 2000 (hosted by Marko Košnik), at the art centre in Hérouville-Saint-Clair in 2001 (hosted by STATION MIR) and in Yogikarta in Indonesia in 2002 (hosted by HONF and the Institut Français Indonesia).

Reminiscent of *Piazza virtuale* is the approach of connecting different locations via video stream, which was now possible via the internet and no longer required complex satellite technology. In Slovenia, for example, venues in Ljubliana, Maribor and Koper were connected to each other and performed together. Another parallel to *Piazza virtuale* and other projects by Mike Hentz was the interest of the organisers in involving local students as well as artists from the respective locations.

---

25 Jurman, Urška, "A Conversation with David Dronet", Worldofart.org, November 2003, http://www.worldofart.org/english/0203/dronet_int.htm
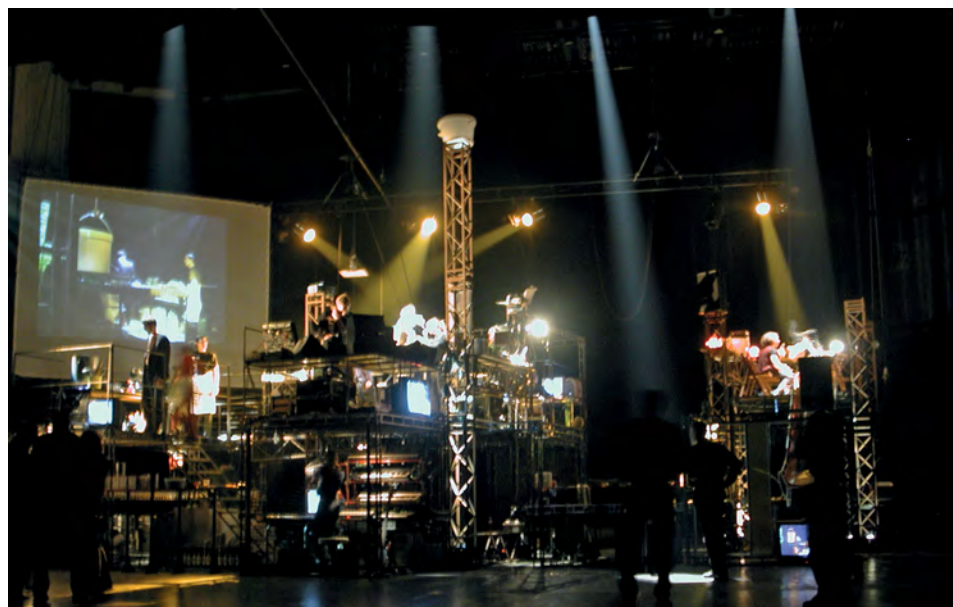
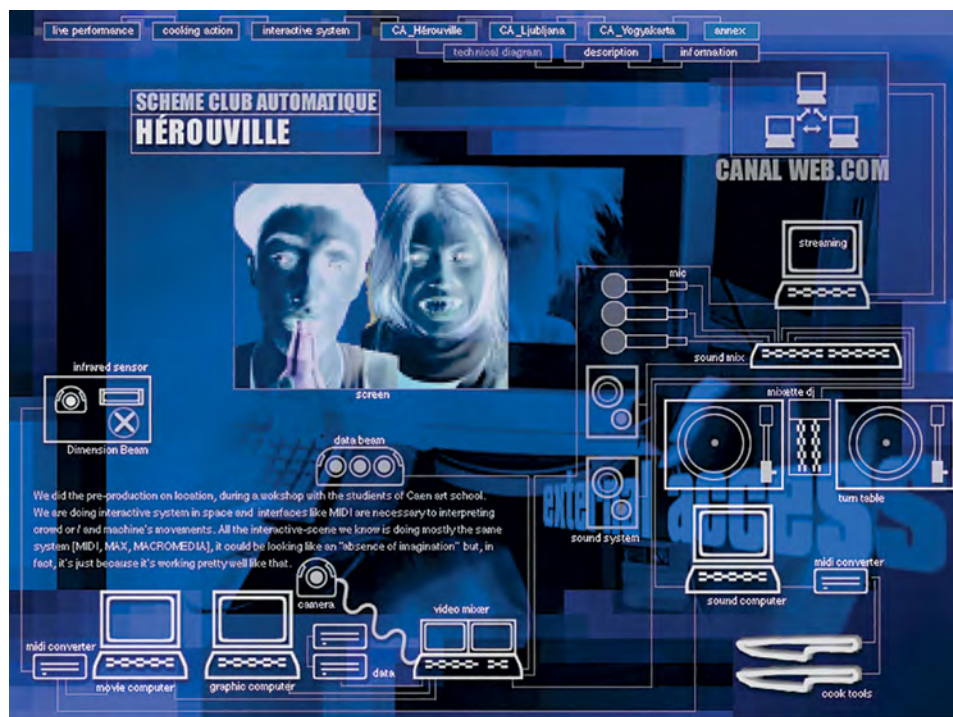*Club Automatique 2010 in Hérouville*
Photo: Gerald Couty

Diagram Club Automatique Heroeville

The container studio at the documenta in Kassel next to the Fridericianum exhibition hall
Photo: altschaffel.com