1 From subject to project: The intellectual and cultural environment of *Piazza virtuale*

Art has often anticipated future developments by aesthetic means. If the German art historian Dieter Daniels is right in his thesis that artists often anticipate future media developments in their works, as argued in his book *Kunst als Sendung*,[1] then Van Gogh TV provides a particularly striking example of this idea with its expansive media project. With the means available at the time, the group not only anticipated the development of the internet and its net culture, but also methods of economic operation, management techniques and a self-image of "cultural workers" that began to spread in the coming decades. I describe this process as "from Subject to Project" – taken from Vilém Flusser,[2] but used here in a different sense.

Whereas in classical modernism and basically since Romanticism the creative self-expression of the individual artist-subject was at the centre of creative work, Van Gogh TV replaced this concept with work in a collective, in which a staff of specialised collaborators worked in a flat hierarchy on a common *project* – a term that takes on a central role in the group's statements and replaces the traditional focus of art on the singular *work*: a painting, a sculpture, a performance. Whereas technology and media had previously often been regarded by artists as the Other, from which they distanced themselves or were at least critical and detached, Van Gogh TV placed the development of its own technology and the audience's participation in the creation of media content at the centre of the group's artistic project. And while artists traditionally perceived the capitalist market, including the art market, at best as a necessary evil or rejected it altogether, Van Gogh TV worked on self-empowerment beyond the

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1 Daniels, *Kunst als Sendung*.

2 Flusser, Vilem, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt: Menschwerdung*, Heppenheim: Bollmann Verlag, 1994.

world of galleries, museums and collectors. To this end, the group cooperated with sponsors and tried out free-market methods of securing their existence. This ultimately led to some of the group's members becoming entrepreneurs and founding their own companies.

The cultural and socio-economic factors that led to this development are already manifest in the work of Minus Delta t, the performance and installation art group and band from which Van Gogh TV emerged in the 1980s. When this group was founded in 1978, art critics had just discovered a new "hunger for images": artist groups or art movements such as the Neue Wilde in Germany, Transavanguardia in Italy, the American New Image Painting or Figuration Libre in France were at that time practising a return to representational painting and oil on canvas.

In contrast to these neo-traditional tendencies, the activities of Minus Delta t and the art groups that followed them, Ponton and Van Gogh TV, were resolutely and purposefully linked to the art practices of the previous decades: performance, conceptual and media art, which had developed from the mid-1960s onwards. At the same time, their work reflected the most current developments in pop and media culture. In their work, they combined elements that at first glance seemed completely unrelated.

At the same time, there were media-historical developments such as the introduction of private television and radio stations and cable television as well as the digitalisation and networking that only a few people noticed at the time. The end of the Warsaw Pact and the subsequent implementation of a neoliberal economic model in large parts of the world, including new practices of work organisation and management techniques, were also taking place. Only when one looks at the work of Minus Delta t and Van Gogh TV as a whole does it become clear why a performance group with an affinity for punk and new wave eventually founded a kind of artists' company, started their own television station and anticipated methods of doing business and organising work that shape the world of business in many areas today.

1.1 "The will to articulate": Gestures of self-empowerment in punk and new wave and Minus Delta t

What similarities do the makers themselves see between their punk performance beginnings with provocative, confrontational and extremely physical actions in the late 1970s and early 1980s and their work on the television show *Piazza virtuale* from 1992 in which the human body is predominantly present as disembodied voices in an acoustic cyberspace? Mike Hentz answers the question in our interview:

> We took our own means of production into our own hands very early on, which was part of the new wave and the independent production of music and video: we moved away from the censorship of the mainstream media and started producing ourselves, distributing ourselves. That was the difference to other performance people who kept relying on this culture industry… [We wanted] to develop our own platforms.[3]

Van Gogh TV took this approach into the new media, which offered completely new possibilities for independent production. That the punk movement, often considered a youth movement of negativity and destruction, should have had such a productive component may come as a surprise. But self-empowerment was part of the movement from the beginning. Punk music, unlike the rock of the 1970s, did not demand musical virtuosity. And punk was not only a musical style, but also included fashion that allowed for personal creativity without craftsmanship, before being reduced to a handful of iconic garments such as spray-painted leather jackets with safety pins and bondage trousers made of red-checked tartan fabric. The punk movement, in its desire for autonomy from the music industry, also spawned the first fanzines, including *Search & Destroy* and *Sniffin' Glue*, and independent labels Rough Trade and Crass Records in the UK and Pure Freude, Ata Tak and Rondo in Germany. (Minus Delta t released two albums on Ata Tak.)

The founding of record labels, magazines, galleries and clubs as well as the independent production of records, cassettes and concerts continued in the new wave movement that followed punk, and with it the principle of self-organisation and DIY. While punk was musically largely a highly simpli-

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3 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

fied version of conventional rock music, new wave allowed for musical exper-
iments and innovations, which often came from bands and musicians that
– like Einstürzende Neubauten or Throbbing Gristle – had no musical train-
ing whatsoever, or at least pretended that was the case. Some of the German
– especially West Berlin – bands from this scene were grouped together un-
der the term *Geniale Dilletanten* (Brilliant Dilletantes). This deliberately mis-
spelled title of a festival that took place in 1981 in Berlin's Tempodrom and
which – also due to a publication of the same name by Wolfgang Müller, who
himself belonged to this scene with his performance group Die tödliche Do-
ris – became synonymous with a brief epoch of artistic awakening.[4] Diedrich
Diederichsen writes about the *Genial Dilletanten*:

> Obviously, an impulse for self-empowerment emanated from punk that very
> soon had little to do with a musically definable style, but everything to do with
> another commonality: a will to articulate … There was thus no common deno-
> minator in the narrow sense of the word, but rather a series of blunt acts of self-
> empowerment that were strongly spurred on by the conquest of economic and
> technical means. What they had in common was at most a qualified or unqua-
> lified rejection, as the case may be, of the standards of rock and proper playing.[5]

Even though Minus Delta t was not included in the festival in the Tempo-
drom or in Wolfgang Müller's book, as artists with little formal art education
and a band with little musical training, they fitted neatly into this context.
Their will to provoke, to deliberately break the rules and – often physically –
confront the audience also corresponded with the zeitgeist of the post-punk
period. Mike Hentz observes:

> We have always had conflicts because we have tried to find the limits of
> existing structures that have laws that are unspoken but defined. On the one
> hand, this was provocation, but on the other hand, we also wanted to enter
> other areas … In the interactive things, the provocations also served to pro-

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4   Müller, Wolfgang, *Geniale Dilletanten*, Berlin: Merve, 1982.

5   Diederichsen, Diedrich, "Genies und ihre Geräusche: German Punk and New Wave
    1978–1982", in Emmerling, Leonhard (ed.), *Geniale Dilletanten: Subkultur der 1980er-Jahre in
    Deutschland*, Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2015, p. 15f.

voke people so that they would participate in the ritual or the event or the performance.[6]

As artists, they benefited from and participated in structures that the German new wave movement had built up: They performed at the Düsseldorf new wave club Ratinger Hof and at the new wave festival Geräusche für die 80er (Noises for the 80s) in Hamburg's Markthalle, and also cultivated an aesthetic in their publications that was reminiscent of the fanzines and record covers of the punk and new wave bands; Minus Delta t member Chrislo Haas joined the influential electropunk bands Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft and Liaisons Dangereuses after leaving the group, and later Crime and the City Solution.

An important characteristic of the new wave scene was the use of new technologies that had just come onto the mass market: Tape recorders were becoming affordable, which made home recording possible without involving expensive sessions in a studio; cheap cassette recorders made it easier to distribute one's own music, which led to a brief boom of cassette labels in the early 1980s.[7] New, inexpensive synthesisers like the Korg MS-20, or even musical toys like the Casio Vl Tone or the Stylophone, allowed non-musicians to produce previously unheard music, the Geräusche für die 80er. And video recorders, especially after the introduction of the VHS format in 1976, led not only to a further development of video art and the emergence of a politically motivated video movement, but also – alongside the amateur film format Super 8 – to the production of quickly and cheaply produced music videos and concert recordings.

Minus Delta t took advantage of all the possibilities offered by these production tools, which were not necessarily new but had now become accessible on the consumer market. They recorded music using a Korg MS-20 synthesiser (which Mike Hentz still has in his studio), issued a cassette on the Belgian independent label Moral, and their two albums *Das Bangkok Projekt* (1984) and *Opera Death* (1987) were released on the Düsseldorf independent label Ata Tak. Their performances and travels through the Eastern Bloc and – during the Bangkok Project – through Asia were documented on VHS tapes,

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6 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

7 A selection of productions from this period can be found on the sampler "Science Fiction Park Bundesrepublik" (ZickZack, 2016), compiled by musician and composer Felix Kubin.

which were shown as part of their contributions to Ars electronica in 1986 and the Osnabrück Media Art Festival in 1988.

From the beginning of the 1980s, the group also used the first PCs available on the consumer market at that time. They had already created their *Philosophische Datenbank* (Philosophical Database, 1983) –installed permanently in the Himalayas – using a Sinclair-ZX-81, one of the first low-priced home computers. From the mid-1980s, Computer Bulletin Board Services (BBS) became an important part of their artistic toolkit. At documenta 8, in addition to video-editing stations and a radio studio, their media bus contained PCs that could be used to dial into the Californian BBS mailbox The WELL. The devices Van Gogh TV worked with for *Hotel Pompino* and *Piazza virtuale* were also mostly off-the-shelf equipment, such as the Atari, Amiga and Apple home computers and IBM clones that were common at that time. In this way, the group took part in one of the most important technical developments, otherwise hardly reflected in the art scene of the 1980s and early 1990s: the emergence of an online media world characterised by the participation and collaboration of its users.

1.2   Performance art, live art, *Aktion*, situation

The art practice that Minus Delta t developed reflects various traditions. Apart from concerts and installations, there were many performances. Mike Hentz also did individual performances as an artist. Whereas the term "performance" often denotes artistic presentations and actions in front of an audience, the performances of Minus Delta t as well as by Hentz typically aimed at teasing some form of reaction or even participation from the audience. In that respect, their work resembled some of the early work of *Marina Abramović* or the *Aktion* (actions) of the Wiener Aktionismus, that often aimed to provoke reactions from the audience, or even state authorities.

They frequently employed provocations or even physical confrontations. In one piece described in detail in a lengthy report on the group, the performers bit audience members in the neck like vampires;[8] as "Kulturpolizei" (cultural police), they took up complaints about art works at documenta 1987

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8 Hartmann, Walter, *Silberne Ameisen, Trillerpfeifen und umgekehrtes Echo, Rock Session: Magazin der populären Musik No. 4*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1980, pp. 48–76.
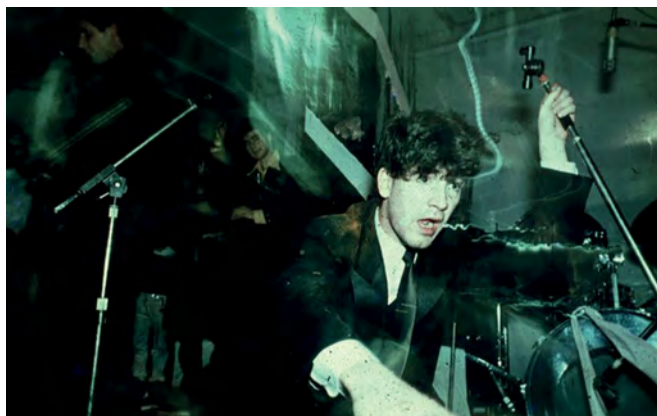
Minus Delta t concert with drill and buzz saw and installation with live chickens at Shvantz Festival in Frankfurt at Städelschule in 1979.
Photos: Ulli Meyer (top)/Minus Delta t

and handcuffed curator Manfred Schneckenburger during a visit by the German president. Mike Hentz, who had previously worked with controversial French performance artist Titus, was arrested when he participated in the Cologne carnival in the uniform of a SS member. In the tradition of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, these activities sought to reduce the distance between actors and spectators by means of aggression and violence. Physical involvement was considered to be an essential precursor to social change, but also to personal change of the spectator. In Minus Delta t's performance work, there are similarities to the Situationism of French philosopher Guy Debord, who wanted to counter the passivity and subjugation of the "spectacle" by creating liberating events that turn the passive audience into a *viveur* (one who lives). These "constructed situations", in which the audience is an active participant, have long been a point of reference for contemporary artists working with live events.

Whereas in *Piazza virtuale* there was no direct provocation or confrontation with the audience, the insistence on everything on the show being live is certainly a legacy of the *Aktion* aesthetic of Minus Delta t. In a way, the whole show was the kind of constructed situation that Debord had in mind, except that here the viewers were supposed to overcome the mind-numbing passivity and subjugation of the spectacle of mass media by actually *becoming part* of television.

1.3   Communication artists: Media art and the opening-up of the media

"Television has tormented us long enough, now we are fighting back." This statement by Nam June Paik is so popular that it was even printed on a postcard. Paik is often referred to as a video artist, which is justified given his many videotapes and video installations. But if one takes a closer look at Paik's statements and works, it quickly becomes clear that a decisive motivation of his work was to bring his art to the mass medium of television. Not only for him, but for many artists of his generation, working with video was ultimately a substitute for the lack of opportunities to actually create television; in this sense, Van Gogh TV with *Piazza virtuale* ties in with the hopes and dreams of many media artists since the late 1960s.

Nam June Paik stated: "I am a communication artist, and therefore I have to communicate with my audience."[9] A number of other artists who tried to use television or communication satellites for their own purposes probably agreed, since some of the video artists of the 1960s and 1970s would have preferred to be on television. However, with a few exceptions – including Gerry Schum's two *Fernsehgaleries* (Television galleries, 1969 and 1970) on German television and the video art shows of the Boston station WGBH-TV in the 1970s – neither commercial television in the USA nor European public television opened up to artists.

Paik, who first used the term "electronic superhighway" to describe the communication networks of the future in a report for the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1970s, invited passers-by from the street to join him in the WGBH-TV studio during his four-hour television performance *Video Commune* in 1970, and at documenta 5 in 1972 the group Telewissen set up a mobile studio in front of the exhibition building. In 1971, the American artist Douglas Davis hosted a call-in programme for the Washington station WTOP-TV entitled *Electronic Hokkadim*,[10] which can be thought of as a direct precursor to the *Piazza virtuale* programme segment *Coffeehouse.* Davis continued to develop television performances with audience participation thereafter, including *The Last Nine Minutes*, his contribution to the TV broadcast at the opening of documenta 1977. But the most successful such actions again came from Nam June Paik, who made television history with the global satellite projects *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984), *Bye Kipling* (1986) and *Wrap around the World* (1988), which were broadcast by television stations in the US, Europe and Asia and can be considered direct predecessors to Van Gogh TV's projects. Like Paik, other artists tried to make use of television satellites: In 1980, the artist duo Mobile Image (Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz) had people in New York and Los Angeles communicate live via a satellite video connection in their work *Hole in Space: A Public Communication Sculpture*; in the following years, satellite sculptures almost became an art genre in their own right, with artists as diverse as General Idea, Jean-Marc Phillippe, Pierre Comte, Ingo Günther, Peter Fend, Dennis Oppenheim, Liza Bear, Willoughby Sharp, Carl Loeffler, Keith Sonnier, Sharon Grace, Wolfgang Staehle and Paul Sharits participating in such projects.

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9 Baumgärtel, Tilman, *net.art 2.0: Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst,* Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2001, p. 46.

10 Baumgärtel, *net.art 2.0,* pp. 50–65.

Some of the same artists were involved in attempts to open up for artistic experimentation the worldwide computer networks that already existed before the internet. The conference Artist's Use of Telecommunication was of particular importance here. The conference was physically held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, but artists in other cities and countries were connected via satellite to the computer system of the company I. P. Sharp. In addition to the organiser Bill Bartlett, the participants in this symposium included Gene Youngblood, Hank Bull (Vancouver), Douglas Davis and Willoughby Sharp (New York), Norman White (Toronto), Sharon Grace (San Francisco) and Robert Adrian X (Vienna). In the following years, a series of online writing collaborations and experiments with Slow Scan Television developed from this conference via the time-sharing network of I. P. Sharp Associates. A detailed account of these activities would go beyond the scope of this book, but it remains to be noted that artists were repeatedly among the first to recognise the potential of new media configurations and try to open them up for purposes that were far removed from the operators of these offerings with their focus on commercial and mass media use.[11]

1.4   *Anruf erwünscht* (calls welcome): Audience participation in German radio and television before *Piazza virtuale*

It was not only artists who tried to open up the new electronic media to their audiences at that time. In the wake of the student movement and 1968, television and radio were looking for ways to give the audience a say in their shows. Influenced by Brecht's radio theory, the Situationists and their reformulation in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien* (Toolbox for a theory of the media, 1968),[12] public broadcasters in West Germany in the 1970s tried to open themselves up to audience participation.

Programmes with audience participation had existed in Germany since the end of the Second World War: In radio shows such as *Der Hörer hat das*

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11 For a more detailed account of these early media experiments, see Baumgärtel, Tilman, "Immaterial Material: Physicality, Corporality, and Dematerialization in Telecommunication Artworks", in Neumark, Norie; Chandler, Annemarie (eds.), *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 60–71.

12 Enzensberger, Hans-Magnus, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media", *New Left Review* no. 64, November/December 1970, pp. 13–36.

Wort (The listener has his say), which was produced by public broadcaster WDR in the 1950s, audience mail was read out on a topic that had been suggested by the listeners.[13] There were similar shows at WDR in the years that followed – for example, *Was meinen Sie dazu* (What do you think?), *Hörerbriefe im Frauenfunk* (Listener's letters to the woman's programme) and *Kritik Replik* (Critical response), in which audience mail was read out and answered on camera.[14] In subsequent shows, the letters were replaced by phone calls, such as in the television programme *Anruf erwünscht* (Calls welcome).[15]

At the beginning of the 1970s, a whole bunch of new programmes appeared on public broadcast television that focused on audience participation.[16] This was very much in line with a zeitgeist that asked to "dare more democracy", as German chancellor Willy Brandt had put it, and this new spirit in society demanded opportunities for the audience to get involved with the media. Shows such as *Jetzt red I* (My turn to talk) on Bayrischer Rundfunk (since 1971) or *Hallo Ü-Wagen* (Calling the outside broadcast vehicle) on WDR radio (1974–2010) let viewers have their say on current affairs in live broadcasts.

Carmen Thomas, the host of *Hallo Ü-Wagen*, became head of the Forum group for participatory programmes at WDR in 1989, which produced *Hörer-innen machen Programm* (Listeners creating shows), *Offenes Radio* (Open radio) and *Funkhaus Wallrafplatz* (Broadcasting Centre Wallrafplatz), among others. To encourage participation, there was a public studio in the centre of Cologne and citizen reporters throughout the WDR broadcasting area who provided support in producing listeners' own radio shows. On the BR-TV magazine *Thema* (Subject matter), callers could comment "uncensored" for 40

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13 Schneider, Irmela, "Zum Versprechen radiophoner Teilhabe: *Der Hörer hat das Wort* (1947–1958)", in Schneider, Irmela; Epping-Jäger, Cornelia (eds.), *Formationen der Mediennutzung III*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015, pp. 115–132.

14 Richter, Christian, "Der Fernsehfriedhof: Fernsehen im Fernsehen", Quotenmeter.de, 25 February 2016, http://www.quotenmeter.de/n/83997/der-fernsehfriedhof-fernsehen-im-fernsehen

15 Katz, Klaus; Witting-Nöthen, Petra; Pätzold, Ulrich; Leder, Dietrich; Schulz, Günther; Ries-Augustin, Ulrike, *Am Puls der Zeit: 50 Jahre WDR*, vol. 3, Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 2006, p. 202.

16 Schabacher, Gabriele, "'Tele-Demokratie': Der Widerstreit von Pluralismus und Partizipation im medienpolitischen Diskurs der 70er Jahre", in Schneider, Irmela; Bartz, Christina; Otto, Isabell (eds.), *Medienkultur der 70er Jahre: Diskursgeschichte der Medien nach 1945*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004, pp. 141–180.

seconds on current affairs; on *Ventil* (Valve) in the ARD afternoon programme, as producer Lisa Kraemer was quoted by *Der Spiegel* in 1971: "everyone who likes should be able to let off steam for two minutes".[17]

In the 1980s, these broadcasts gradually disappeared from television. From 1979, however, ZDF began to utilise the new Tele-Dialog system (Tele dialogue, TED), a tele-voting technology developed in cooperation with Deutsche Bundespost, which was used in television shows.[18] When a call was made, an impulse was triggered on a data line, a procedure that was in some respects a precursor to the control of computer programs that took place with the help of tone dialling at *Piazza virtuale*.

These beginnings of technological-interactive audience participation, which was soon also used in game shows such as *Wetten, dass...?* (Wanna bet?), led to political controversy at the time: In 1987, Peter Paterna (SPD), a member of the German Bundestag (parliament), even wanted to ban TED voting on television: *Der Spiegel* reported: "Such electronic voting, the social democratic media expert complained, is constitutionally questionable, if not unconstitutional", because it "seems to demonstrate the will of the people, which takes on plebiscite-like forms". The consequence is a "massive pressure of opinion that endangers the independence of MPs" – the principle of representative democracy, according to which parliamentarians are "not bound by orders and instructions" (Article 38 of the Basic Law), was endangered.

Paterna based his criticism on the BTX Agreement of 1983, which expressly forbade voting by screen text. (*Bildschirmtext* – BTX – was an online videotext system launched in West Germany in 1983 by the Deutsche Bundespost.) He argued: "The official justification for the BTX Agreement fits TV exactly, if the telephone line is used as a 'back channel'."[19]

To build such a "back channel" into the mass medium was, of course, precisely the goal of Van Gogh TV and *Piazza virtuale*. This inclusion of the audience in the work of Minus Delta t also corresponded with the changing work culture of the time, which gave employees greater freedom and more pronounced opportunities for participation.

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17   "Offener Kanal", *Spiegel* No. 33, 1971, p. 95f.

18   Schneider, Irmela, "Tele-Dialog und das 'Stimmrecht' des Mediennutzers", in Schneider, Irmela; Epping-Jäger, Cornelia (eds.), *Formationen der Mediennutzung III*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015, pp. 147–168.

19   "Klimbim mit Ted", *Spiegel* No. 7, 1987, p. 199.

1.5 The "new spirit of capitalism": The culture of work at *Piazza virtuale*

Finally, the work of Van Gogh TV will be considered in the context of the larger tectonic changes in society, economy and politics that took place in Europe around 1990 and which were reflected by the project. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of socialism, the capitalist economic order seemed to have emerged victorious in the contest of political systems. But it was not only the former countries of the Warsaw Pact that had to undergo a drastic rehabilitation after the system change from socialism to capitalism. In exchange for support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Eastern Bloc countries had to submit to the Washington Consensus, which included privatisation of state property, deregulation of the economy and liberalisation of the financial markets. In Western countries such as Britain or the USA, the public sector had already been restructured according to the dogma of neoliberalism for almost a decade in the wake of Thatcherism and Reagonomics. In Germany, the neoliberal instruments were only introduced by the CDU-led government under Helmut Kohl when, from the early 1990s, combating the economic crisis triggered by reunification with the practically bankrupt GDR.

In the new federal states, state property was privatised on a large scale by the *Treuhand*, and throughout Germany the state was pushed back in favour of the "forces of the free market economy" in the years that followed. As a result, it became increasingly common in culture to hold exhibitions and other art activities with the help of sponsors due to a lack of public funding, a practice that Minus Delta t had pioneered in the 1980s. The truck Minus Delta t used to transport a stone from Wales to Bangkok during their *Bangkok Project* from 1982 to 1984 already bore the logos of sponsors such as Miele, Continental, Sinclair and Milde Sorte that had supported the project; further funds were generated through the sale of a *Kunstaktie* (Art share*).

At that time, working with sponsors in art was still frowned upon and earned the group a great deal of criticism; something that is hard to imagine today, when art exhibitions have "Platinum Sponsors" and cooperate with international brands. Van Gogh TV not only continued these practices at *Piazza virtuale*, but also professionalised them: a dedicated staff member was responsible for working with sponsors; the containers in Kassel from which the group broadcast *Piazza virtuale* were emblazoned not only with the logo of Telekom, without whose sponsored satellite connection the programme

could not have taken place, but also with the names of computer companies such as Apple or Armstrad, the computer magazine *Mac-Up*, Lavazza and the American IT service provider Electronic Data Systems.

At the same time, the way the project anticipated some of the management techniques that would be adopted by many companies in the years to come, especially IT and internet start-ups, of which Van Gogh TV was in some ways a precursor. Van Gogh TV achieved its goals with a minimum of overhead and manpower, reminiscent of the kind of post-Taylorist management techniques that became known by such buzzwords as *lean management* or *lean production*.

Before we explore the ways Van Gogh TV and Ponton used management techniques that would become common in the industry in the 1990s, there is an important caveat: the group was not a commercial enterprise and did not make any money for its founders; the purpose of the Lab in Hamburg was to be a place for art and technical innovation, not a company set up to make profits. But even though the project was not a business enterprise or a source of income for its founders, it operated in a similar way to the kind of companies that, in the course of economic deregulation and flexibilisation from the 1990s onwards, dismantled hierarchies and replaced the big bureaucratic organisation with *networks* and *projects*. In pursuing its goals, it often acted unconventionally and without too much respect for rules and regulations. "Move fast and break things", Facebook's former corporate motto, which the company had derived from the hacker culture, also describes Van Gogh TV's approach.

Especially when it comes to employee management, Van Gogh TV's approach is reminiscent of the methods preached since the 1980s by American "management gurus" such as Tom Peters and Alvin Toffler Drucker:

> They propagate participation instead of formal authority, personal responsibility instead of hierarchical control, autonomy instead of factory discipline … Along with the institutional hierarchy, the arcane knowledge of the upper echelons should also disappear, pyramid-shaped organisations should be replaced by self-responsible teams that are connected to each other in a network … What is demanded is a creative subject that does not rest in the supposed security of routines, but reinvents its work every day.[20]

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20 Bröckling, Ulrich, "Bakunin Consulting, Inc.", in von Osten, Marion (ed.), *Norm der Abweichung*, Zürich: Springer, 2003, pp. 19–38, at 19.

The staff of Van Gogh TV were not primarily guided by financial interests – in real companies, the programmers and technicians in particular could have earned much more than the monthly salaries of between DM500 and DM1200 that they received for the demanding and complex work on *Piazza virtuale.* But in return, this job offered a great deal of personal freedom and the opportunity for self-realisation that probably would not have existed in more traditional companies.

Manuel Tessloff, who – in collaboration with Julian Boyd – composed the music for the show and was responsible for the sound engineering for the live broadcasts, describes the working atmosphere at *Piazza virtuale* as "extremely emotional and extremely hungry to do something really unique… We were also aware […] that we were working with technology that just wasn't on every desk, but was something very special and totally new, with which we could now also do something that simply hadn't been done before".[21]

Christiane Klappert, responsible for marketing and press relations, describes it in a similar way: "So on the one hand there was the tension, the pressure to be on air every day and to do all the organisational tasks. But of course there was also always the feeling of being part of an avant-garde, really totally exciting project. With *Ponton*, you always had the feeling: we are pioneers."[22] And Nicolas Baginski, creator of the robotic camera in the studio, remembers: "Everyone was of course also extremely hooked on the challenge … Everyone sat there and worked from morning till night. … Everyone was inspired by the work and incredibly ambitious and tried to do something unique that hadn't been done before."[23]

The fact that they were working on an art project seems to have played a special role in staff motivation: Engineer and programmer Christian Wolff, who developed the telephone interface and other technologies that were an important foundation for the project, describes it like this: "None of us really got paid. We really did everything of our own free will and because it interested us … But we always had a good time in the containers. There were always a lot of other documenta artists who came by and were very interested in what we were doing."[24]

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21 Interview with Manuel Tessloff, 28 March 2019.

22 Interview with Christiane Klappert, 20 February 2019.

23 Interview with Nicolas Baginsky, 21 February 2019.

24 Interview with Christian Wolff, 22 May 2018.

For the French economists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, work in which one can realise oneself and which is a challenge to one's creativity is the hallmark of a new, post-industrial work culture that developed in the 1990s. Interestingly, according to their analysis, this work culture developed out of a criticism of the post-war world of work, which they call *artist critique*. For their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), they analysed management literature from the 1960s and 1990s and observed significant ideological changes in capitalism. While between 1930 and 1960 "the large, centralised, thoroughly bureaucratised and megalomaniac industrial enterprise" predominated, in the period under study, this was replaced by a globalised corporate capitalism based on new technologies and in which workers demanded more freedom to do their work as they saw fit.

These changes in capitalism were triggered by two types of critique: on the one hand, a social critique that saw capitalism as unjust and exploitative, and on the other hand, an artist critique that rejected capitalism because it oppresses the autonomous subject and forces it into externally determined, uncreative work. This form of criticism was introduced into the debate by the student movement and the "68ers":

> This artist critique first developed in small circles of artists and intellectuals ... [They] criticised the oppression in a capitalist world (the rule of markets, discipline, the factory), the uniformity in a mass society and the transformation of all objects into commodities. In contrast, it cultivates an ideal of individual autonomy and freedom, an appreciation of uniqueness and authenticity.[25]

This critique came out of the lifestyle of the artist, which

> has always been an attractive model of lifestyle. Artists, at least so it is said, lead a free life and work in a self-determined way. That is why their way of life was long considered an alternative to an alienated, externally determined life ... It is easier to criticise something if you can give a model of how it could be better. The artist's existence was such a model.[26]

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25 Boltanski, Luc; Chiapello, Eve, "Die Arbeit der Kritik und der normative Wandel", in von Osten (ed.), *Norm der Abweichung*, pp. 57–67.

26 Misik, Robert, "Was ist der 'Neue Geist' des Kapitalimus, Frau Chiapello?", https://misik.at/2006/10/was_ist_der_neue_geist_des_kapitalismus_frau_chiapello/

Those working on the *Piazza virtuale* art project found exactly the kind of "artistic freedom" that they would have been denied in a traditional company. Not only did they accept much lower pay for it; it even motivated them to perform at their best because they adopted the artistic goals of the project as their own, turning extrinsic into intrinsic motivation.

German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz observes this mechanism not only in the creative industries, but in every kind of modern enterprise:

> Nowadays, everyone *wants* and *is supposed to be* creative. Behind this is what I call the "creativity dispositive": an individual and social orientation towards the creative that is both a desire and a pressure. In the past, religion and politics were classic places where meaning and satisfaction could be found. In modern society, this function is increasingly fulfilled by the aesthetic-creative.

For Reckwitz, too, the figure of the artist and his model of life is the reference for this kind of work:

> When so-called postmodern management calls for flat hierarchies, team orientation and the withdrawal of the strict division of labour within companies, the artist collective seems to be the model here [...] for a strictly functionally and hierarchically oriented matrix organisation. The idea that the work process should be emotional and affective – and precisely not purely goal-directed and thus emotionally neutral – also becomes central.[27]

Composer Manuel Tessloff describes this affective bond with the work at *Piazza virtuale*: "We had parties, also together with the people in Kassel on the Piazza, and broadcast them live. And it was [...] always emotional, it was always a different situation because of the different constellations that came up."[28] As satisfying and fulfilling as the work situation may be remembered by some former Van Gogh TV staffers as being, for some, the identification and dedication to the work also led to burnout and illness. Salvatore Vanasco remembers that "from mid-August onwards, we often feared we wouldn't be

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27 Kretschmer, Winfried, "Bloß nicht krativ sein: Wie die Kreativität erfunden wurde und wie sie unsere Gesellschaft bestimmt – ein Gespräch mit Andreas Reckwitz", http://www.changex.de/Article/interview_reckwitz_bloss_nicht_nicht_kreativ_sein/

28 Interview with Tessloff.

able to run the show anymore because everyone was sick, because simply the strain of two years broke out all at once".[29] French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has shown in his book *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* that such symptoms are often triggered by being overwhelmed by high-pressure demands.[30]

With all the opportunity for creative activity and self-realisation, the founders of Ponton admittedly set the goals and the framework of the project within which the employees could prove themselves – as is probably ultimately the case with any company that practises the "new spirit of capitalism", according to Boltanski and Chiapello.[31] Mike Hentz stresses the demands that this style of working placed on him and the other founders of Van Gogh TV:

> Karel, Salve, Benji and I together acted as mediators, canvassers, team leaders, mediators and idea generators. We prepared the *Piazza virtuale* project for almost a year. We set goals and pursued ideas together with the team, the implementation of which was monitored, supplemented and developed in weekly meetings. In the event of financial bottlenecks or deadline pressure, we as a "gang of four" set the priorities in a thoroughly authoritarian manner. The team accepted our authority, but always smiled upon our stress. They could always concentrate on their projects in the lab, while we, busy with acquisition and negotiations, were permanently on the road.[32]

By giving their employees extensive creative freedom within a given framework, the four founders of Van Gogh TV operated like the kind of business leader Boltanski and Chiapello call a "neomanager": "a creative, intuitive, inventive person with visions, contacts, casual acquaintances". This person would meet the need for authenticity and freedom of employees by encouraging qualities such as "autonomy, spontaneity, mobility, availability, creati-

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29 Interview with Salvatore Vanasco, 8 June 2018.

30 Ehrenberg, Alain, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Quebec: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009.

31 Boltanski, Luc; Chiapello, Eve, *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus*, Konstanz: UVK, 2003.

32 Ernst, Christoph; Schröter, Jens; Dudesek, Karel; Heidersberger, Benjamin; Vanasco, Salvatore; Hentz, Mike, "Reimagining *Piazza virtuale* – A Conversation with Van Gogh-TV", in Ernst, Christoph; Schröter, Jens (eds.), *(Re-)Imagining New Media: Techno-Imaginaries around 2000 and the Case of "Piazza virtuale" (1992)*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2021, pp. 111–170, at 137.

vity, pluricompetence [and] the ability to form networks". These qualities are "borrowed directly from the world of ideas of the 68ers".[33]

It was precisely the ability to build networks and make use of them that was one of the characteristics of the work of Minus Delta t, Ponton and Van Gogh TV. *Piazza virtuale* would not have been possible without the manifold networks that its founders – especially Mike Hentz – had created. Christiane Klappert speaks of an aura around the Ponton founders that gave them a certain aloofness: "Of course, it was all also very, very mystical: 'We are subversive, we come from the punk scene, but we can also talk to the Pope and the Dalai Lama at any time. We also know them all personally.' That was the nimbus or the reputation that preceded them."[34] Artist Ulrike Gabriel, who had worked on *Hotel Pompino*, adds:

> They always generated these societies. They always had a lot of people in tow, Minus Delta TV already did, when they drove this stone around the world and an insane number of people were involved. Of course these are also networks and this is living art, and that was certainly an expression of the times at the highest level … Such insane, open networking projects that creatively connected so many people without anyone really understanding what was actually going on.[35]

Ponton's network condensed into a project – as defined by Boltanski and Chiapello – with *Piazza virtuale*, a term that keeps coming up with both Minus Delta t and Ponton. In Minus Delta t, this begins with the *Bangkok Project*. *Die philosophische Datenbank* was also referred to as a project in the Ars Electronica catalogue, as is *Hotel Pompino* later on. Because the term has become so common today – just like team, which is also mentioned repeatedly in Ponton's statements – it is perhaps no longer even discernible how unusual it was at that time for a group of artists to list only projects in their CVs, just as more traditional artists list their works and exhibitions.

For Boltanski and Chiapello, the project is a "temporary node in the network". The project comes out of the network and dissolves into it again, the individual is in a chain of projects in this new world of work; a linear career

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33   Boltanski; Chiapello, *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus*, p. 143f.

34   Interview with Klappert.

35   Interview with Ulrike Gabriel, 6 June 2018.

is replaced by the ability to be involved in projects as prominently as possible and to use them as a springboard for the next project. This description also applies to *Piazza virtuale*: Everyone involved knew that working on *Piazza virtuale* was limited to a period of a few months, and that they had to get the maximum of cultural capital, network anchoring and new skills out of it.

The artist Ronald Gonko, who organised a mini-studio at *Piazza virtuale* with Piazzetta Bremen in the art academy that provided live programmes for the show, said in our interview: "I learned so much in that time, as never again afterwards in such a short time."[36] Janine Sack, who worked on the Hamburg Piazzetta as a member of *Frauen und Technik* (Women and technology), expressed a similar opinion: working on *Piazza virtuale* was "actually the most important part of my education", an "insanely important step in acquiring certain basic skills that still carry me today. An independent way of working, also a freedom from fear, to enter into new contexts and structures again and again and to always look for collaborations in which you can do projects".[37]

For many of the contributors, *Piazza virtuale* was the first step on a personal career path that led some of them to highly prestigious jobs at universities, research institutions or media and IT companies, but for others it was also the beginning of an existence as independent freelancers, as artists, curators, designers or authors, or as entrepreneurs with their own media companies. Thus, many of the participants benefited directly from their participation in *Piazza virtuale*, both from their integration into the network of which they became a part through their participation, but also from the experience and qualifications they gained through their involvement in the project.

Mike Hentz said as much when he pointed out:

A lot of collaborators had additional commercial jobs via our connections and made good careers out of them. All projects involved "state of the art" technology, experimentation and innovative possibilities, which provided about 70 per cent of our collaborators' experience and the possibility to become highly paid specialists, who at this moment can pick and choose their jobs.[38]

However, it is important to keep in mind another point that Hentz stresses: Ponton was not a commercial business, but rather a non-profit enter-

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36 Interview with Ronald Gonko, 22 February 2019.

37 Interview with Janine Sack and Cornelia Sollfrank, 8 June 2019.

38 *Mike Hentz Works 4*, Cologne: Salon Verlag, 1999, unpaginated.

prise, where the founders did not benefit financially from the work that the staff put into the project: "Out of us four directors [Heidersberger, Vanasco, Hentz and Dudesek] besides Karel Dudesek (only timewise) nobody was paid through the lab, but through other supplementary jobs (professor, teaching, journalism, consultation) we financed our work in the Ponton Lab. Every penny was invested in infrastructure and equipment."[39]

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Drawing parallels between postmodern, neoliberal management techniques and the organisation of Van Gogh TV is not intended as a criticism of the approach of the group. Nor is it a mocking reference to how the group forged a new form of self-exploitation out of the self-empowerment attitude of the punk movement and the possibilities offered by computer networks. Rather, it is meant to highlight how the group transformed the methods of DIY and self-organisation they had employed in their art practice into methods by which such an elaborate and complex project as *Piazza virtuale* could be carried out in the first place.

In this way, Van Gogh TV anticipated the development from an individual, artistic subject to a collaborator on a creative project, which is practised not only in the creative industries, but also in the corporate culture of many of today's most successful companies. Not only at internet companies such as Facebook, Google or Uber, but even at the former sponsor Deutsche Telekom, today the rhetoric of the employee who takes risks in a self-responsible and creative manner and is involved in a way not envisaged by traditional industrial companies is ubiquitous.

Thus, with *Piazza virtuale*, Van Gogh TV anticipated a zeitgeist that shortly thereafter began to prevail not only in the economy but in many areas of society: a development in which responsibility for the individual is no longer assumed by the state (or by any other institution), but by the individual. Foucault described this new form of governmentality in *The Birth of Biopolitics*: "I will provide you with the possibilities for freedom. I will arrange it so that you are free to be free."[40] The (unspoken) programme of the organisation of work at *Piazza virtuale* could also be delineated in this way.

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39 Ibid.

40 Foucault, Michel, *Die Geburt der Biopolitik: Geschichte der Gouvernementalität II: Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1978/1979*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 97.

*The Minus Delta t media bus at the documenta in Kassel
(in the foreground Karel Dudesek (left) and Mike Hentz).*
Photo: Minus Delta t