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Tilman Baumgärtel
with Julian Weinert
Van Gogh TV's "Piazza Virtuale"

Media Studies | Volume 96

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Van Gogh TV's "Piazza Virtuale"

The Invention of Social Media at documenta IX in 1992

[transcript]

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This publication and the research project "Van Gogh TV. Critical Edition, Multimedia-documentation and analysis of their Estate" (Project 388224396) were funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

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Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld
Cover illustration: Screenshots from "Piazza virtuale"
Typeset: Jan Gerbach, Bielefeld
Printed by docupoint GmbH, Magdeburg
Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-6066-1
PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-6066-5
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665
ISSN of series: 2569-2240
eISSN of series: 2702-8984

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - BY NC SA

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How to use this book

Piazza virtuale by Van Gogh TV was a television project. One of the most important goals of our research project that was funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and conducted by the University of Bonn and Hochschule Mainz from 2018 to 2021 was to make material from the show accessible to the public.

For this purpose the website http://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/ was created. It contains clips from the show, recordings of the interviews that were conducted during our research, and scans of documents, photos, storyboards and sketches that we found in the archive of Van Gogh TV. QR codes throughout the book, that can be scanned with a smartphone or a computer, allow for direct access to this material. In the e-book version, these QR codes provide direct links to the website.

The bulk of the book was written by project leader Tilman Baumgärtel with contributions by research associate Julian Weinert. Individual texts are marked with "jw" for Julian Weinert and "tb" for Tilman Baumgärtel.

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Introduction: "Hallo TV"

On 13 June 1992, a strange television show premiered during the morning schedule of German public broadcaster 3sat. There were no presenters, no announcements, no explanations. In fact, no show at all. Instead, you could call a telephone number that was displayed on the TV screen. And if you were lucky and got through, you were suddenly on air and could speak to the world via TV. Up to four callers found themselves in a strange, random community, could chat with each other or give a speech to mankind. Many callers were so startled that they hung up immediately. Others managed little more than "Hallo". Some tried to make conversation with the other callers. Others made farting noises until they were thrown off the line.

The show was called *Piazza virtuale*. It was a unique experiment in the history of television. As a special project of documenta IX, it was broadcast for 100 days in the summer of 1992 from a container studio next to the Fridericianum, documenta's main site. Organised by artists' group Van Gogh TV, the show consisted of largely unmoderated contributions from the audience, who provided the content of the programme by phone calls, fax or computer chat. The aim of the artists was to put Bertolt Brecht's famous demand from his *Radio Theorie* into practice: Consumers of media content were to become producers of it. In addition to the phone-in programme *Coffeehouse*, there were interactive parts of the show where viewers could paint or make music together using the keyboard of their phone.

The Piazza virtuale studio in Kassel. From left: Ole Lütjens, Salvatore Vanasco, Anne-Katrin Brinkmann, Christian Wolff, in the foreground visiting members of the Chaos Computer Club
Photo: Ali Altschaffel (altschaffel.com)

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Van Gogh TV was an association of artists and hackers that emerged from the Minus Delta t performance group. The founders of the collective, the artists Mike Hentz, Karel Dudesek, Benjamin Heidersberger and Salvatore Vanasco, had worked systematically to open up the media to its audience since the creation of the group. In doing so, they anticipated forms of programming and interaction that have only become established with the help of the "social media" of the last two decades.

They gathered a team that built a completely computerised studio out of commercially available technology – at a time when German television stations were still using magnetic videotape and broadcasting live programmes from physical studios. And the group created a network of supporters and sponsors who helped them to carry out their most ambitious project, *Piazza virtuale*, in 1992.

The "Hallos" of the callers earned the show the mocking nickname "Hallo TV". This was meant as a pot-shot about the perceived lack of content of the show. Today, the term seems to have taken on a different meaning. If you enter an unfamiliar room full of people that you do not know, you might introduce yourself with a "Hallo". The countless "Hallos" at *Piazza virtuale* are just that: a first utterance in a new, unfamiliar space, a timid attempt to make contact. *Who else is there?*

Although the works of Van Gogh TV are among the most important media art projects of the last decades and *Piazza virtuale* was the largest ever television project by artists, until recently there has been no scholarly literature on the group. Perhaps more importantly, there was hardly any audio-visual documentation of their achievements. Despite their pioneering role, they are either not mentioned at all in the relevant standard works on media and internet art[1]

1 Decker, Edith; Weibel, Peter (eds.), *Vom Verschwinden der Ferne: Telekommunikation und Kunst*, Köln: Dumont, 1990; Dinkla, Söke, *Pioniere Interaktiver Kunst*, Karlsruhe: Cantz, 1997; Frieling, Rudolf; Daniels, Dieter (eds.), *Medien Kunst Interaktion: Die 80er und 90er Jahre in Deutschland / Media Art Interaction: The 1980s and 1990s in Germany*, Vienna: Springer, 2000; Frieling, Rudolf; Daniels, Dieter (eds.), *Medien Kunst Netz 1: Medienkunst im Überblick*, Vienna: Springer, 2004; Frieling, Rudolf; Daniels, Dieter (eds.): *Medien Kunst Netz 2 / Media Art Net 2: Thematische Schwerpunkte / Key Topics*, Vienna: Springer, 2005; Frieling, Rudolf; Herzogenrath, Wulf (eds.), *40jahrevideokunst.de: Digitales Erbe: Videokunst in Deutschland von 1963 bis heute*, Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006; Greene, Rachel, *Internet Art: Modern and Contemporary Art* (World of Art), London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, Paul, Christiane, *Digital Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002; Frieling, Rudolf; Daniels, Dieter; Herzogenrath, Wulf, *40yearsvideoart.de Digi-*

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or only in passing.[2] The vast majority of texts about the group – more than 150 in the German and international press – appeared in newspapers and in art and cultural magazines before and during *Piazza virtuale*. When the show ended, there was virtually no concluding reflection, nor was there any longer-term historicisation of the show. And, even worse, there was little opportunity to actually see what was broadcast during the more than three months that *Piazza virtuale* was on air, apart from some random clips on YouTube that were uploaded by some of the participants or fans of the show.

After a long hiatus, the group started work on its archive in the mid-2010s. They used the occasion of an exhibition at a gallery in Berlin to view and put in order the video recordings of the show with the plan to make these records available for research.[3] From an archival perspective, the amount of material that emerged from this activity was intimidating: more than 800 hours of broadcast recordings, three dozen files of correspondence, a hard disk from a 1992 Mac, and some of the technical equipment that had been specially developed by the group.

Van Gogh TV offered the material to the Institut für Mediengestaltung (Institute for Media Design) at Hochschule Mainz, which partnered with the Abteilung für Medienwissenschaft (Department of Media Studies) at Rheinische Friedrichs-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn in order to apply to Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a research grant to work on the estate of Van Gogh TV. Funding was granted from April 2017 to March 2021; the research eventually went on until August of that year.

Van Gogh TV's *Piazza virtuale* inhabits its own unique space in the prehistory of internet culture, virtual communities and internet art. But unlike later projects of net.art that have been archived or made accessible again in the last couple of years by initiatives such as Rhizome.org,[4] the legacy of Van Gogh TV is mostly not digital, a factor that turned out to be a blessing in

tal Heritage: Video Art in Germany from 1963 to the Present, Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006; Tribe, Mark; Jana, Reena, *New Media Art*, Cologne: Taschen Verlag, 2006.

2 Daniels, Dieter, *Kunst als Sendung: Von der Telegraphie zum Internet*, Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2002; Daniels, Dieter; Berg, Stefan, *Telegen: Kunst und Fernsehen*, Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2015.

3 Baumgärtel, Tilman, "Heute heißt das Chat: Van Gogh TV haben in Zeiten von Bundespost und Rundfunk das Netz gedacht. In Berlin ordnen sie ihren Nachlass", *taz. die tageszeitung*, 12 September 2014, https://www.taz.de/!297292/

4 Connor, Michael J.; Dean, Aria; Espenschied, Dragan (eds.), *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, New York: Rhizome, 2019.

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disguise. Whereas we first lamented the large volume of material that we had to digitise in order to process it using contemporary methodologies and technologies, we gradually began to understand that we could only access such a rich trove of material because it was mostly analogue. Whatever was digital in the estate of Van Gogh TV had practically become inaccessible in the more than two decades since *Piazza virtuale*. The VHS and Betamax tapes that were delivered to us in stacks of boxes might not have been as easily handled as a collection of contemporary digital files on a hard disk or in the "cloud" on some server. The recordings on obscure, long-obsolete video formats such as MII, Hi8, U-matic or S-VHS required players that are no longer manufactured and are only available at specialised labs. The three dozen files with photos and paper correspondence with collaborators were not readily searchable for keywords, nor could they easily be filed and analysed using contemporary computer programs. In addition, the many faxes on thermal paper that were found in these files were often faded and hard to read.

However, as cumbersome as the work with this material seemed at first, we eventually understood that the analogue material had survived for a period of time that most digital formats do not. If *Pizza Virtuale* had taken place only a few years later, most of the correspondence would have been via email and would most likely no longer be accessible. Digital video recordings from the mid-1990s onward were typically saved on data storage media that are now even less accessible than the old analogue tapes.

After three years of research, all the material that we received from Van Gogh TV has been digitised. Videos, letters, photos, slides, sketches, notes and faxes are stored on hard disks and in the "cloud" in formats that we have reason to believe will not be obsolete in a couple of years. We set up a website with clips from the programme and other materials that give an impression of the nature and scope of the show.

There are excerpts from each of the 14 segments that the group developed and from each of the 24 Piazzettas, the micro-studios set up all over Europe that contributed their own programming to *Piazza virtuale*, transcripts of the more than 30 interviews with Van Gogh TV, contributors to the show and contemporary witnesses we conducted during our research and a sizeable selection of other sources. Much of this information on the website is linked via QR-codes to this book to allow the reader direct access to the multimedia material that cannot be reproduced in a printed publication. We hope that this material will allow the reader to come up with their own answers to the

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principal question that guided our research: How did a group of artists, in 1992, conceive the idea to start their own television station? Was their show a forerunner of the social media of today? And what is their relevance in the history of telecommunication and internet art that began in the 1960s and has become an important genre in contemporary art.

This book will provide a theoretical and historical framework for the development of *Piazza virtuale* and locate Van Gogh TV in the genealogy of media and media art history. From the perspective of the electronic mass media, the projects of Van Gogh TV and *Piazza virtuale* in particular occupy a unique place in the historical trajectory of television in the Federal Republic of Germany, in which democracy and participation played an important role from the 1970s onwards. From the perspective of the new online media, *Piazza virtuale* was a first step into the newly discovered "cyberspace". Seen in the context of contemporary art, there are points of comparison between the activities of the group and the concept of Joseph Beuys' "social sculpture".[5] As I will show, *Piazza virtuale* was also an attempt to introduce performance art with audience participation into the mass medium of television. And in the context of media art, their promises of direct involvement of the viewer are realized in a way that goes far beyond the interactive installations common in this art genre at that time.

We will start with a broad overview of the dominant tendencies in the contemporary art of the post-war period that were of relevance to *Piazza virtuale*. The first chapter will also show how Van Gogh TV addressed in its artistic practice brand-new social, cultural and media developments that unfolded in the 1990s and still determine our lives today. Perhaps surprisingly, apart from developments in performance and media art, we will also look at the punk and new wave scene out of which the group emerged, and new management techniques that were developed in the context of post-Taylorism that led to the New Economics of the 1990s, as some of the founders and members of Van Gogh TV went on to found their own media companies. Arguably, Van Gogh TV was a forerunner of the start-up culture of the 1990s onwards.

As the group developed out of an artistic culture that put a premium on collective creative action, we will then look at some of the art collectives and projects that the members of the group were involved with before the founding of Van Gogh TV, as well as the umbrella organisation Ponton. Based on

5 See Baumgärtel, Tilman, *Eintritt in ein Lebewesen*, Berlin: Kunstraum Kreuzberg, 2020.

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research in the files received from the group, we will then reconstruct the process that led in a remarkably short time to the development of *Piazza virtuale* and the activities and work organisation in Kassel during the period of broadcast. We will look at audience reaction, the press and PR work and the interactions with the sponsors of the show. Finally, in the appendices, there are in-depth descriptions of the various segments (Appendix 1), the contributions of the Piazzettas (Appendix 2) and the technological innovations that the group created (Appendix 3).

Here's hoping that this account of the work of Van Gogh TV will lead to the rediscovery and a reappraisal of Van Gogh TV and of *Piazza virtuale*. All the necessary material is available now. You only have to look at it.

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The "art stock" of Minus Delta t (1982)

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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

1 Daniels, *Kunst als Sendung*.

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

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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.

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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-

3 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

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fied version of conventional rock music, new wave allowed for musical experiments and innovations, which often came from bands and musicians that – like Einstürzende Neubauten or Throbbing Gristle – had no musical training whatsoever, or at least pretended that was the case. Some of the German – especially West Berlin – bands from this scene were grouped together under the term *Geniale Dilletanten* (Brilliant Dilletantes). This deliberately misspelled 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 Doris – 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 denominator 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 unqualified 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 Tempodrom 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-

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.

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> 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,

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.

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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

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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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.

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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*

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.

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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

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.

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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.

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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

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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]

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

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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]

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.

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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]

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/

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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

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.

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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-

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.

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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

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

34 Interview with Klappert.

35 Interview with Ulrike Gabriel, 6 June 2018.

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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-

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.

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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]

***

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.

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.

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

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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

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most daring and experimental (media) art projects of the time from 1988 onwards 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 personnel 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-Amerikanische Freundschaft (DAF) and Liaisons Dangereuses.

Among the activities that made Minus Delta t well-known in the German 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] Provocations 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*.

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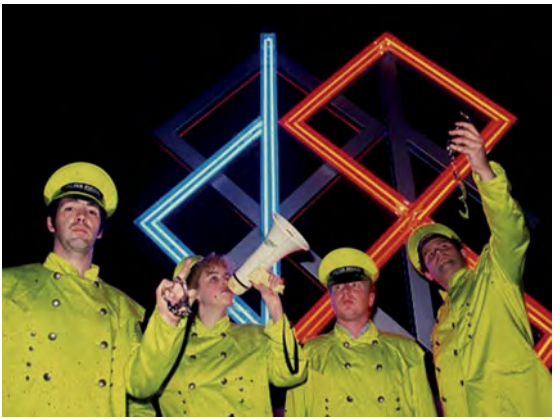
Minus Delta t as "Kulturpolizei" (cultural police) at documenta 1987. From left: Mike Hentz, Malika Ziouech, Michael Delta, Karel Dudesek
Photo: Jan Riephoff



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

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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.

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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/

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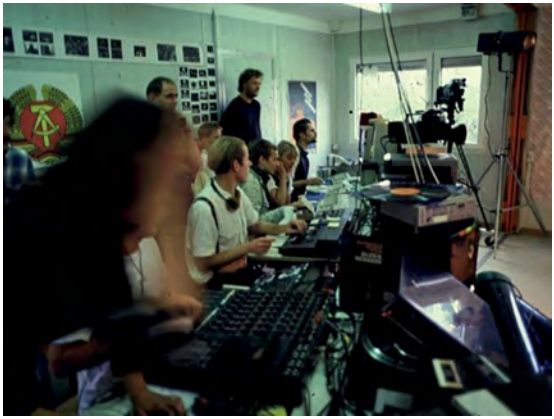

Minus Delta t
at Ars Electronica 1986 in
Linz: the container studio
next to Bruckner Haus,
inside the studio and party
Photos: Minus Delta t

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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]

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

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

9 Ibid.

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Above all, everyday pictures from Austria should be included:

> Ice skaters in a circle, music band from a wedding, funeral procession or anniversary, swimming pool, a topless woman and a woman in a swimming costume, 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 Central 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.

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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.

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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-

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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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access -

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.

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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

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> With a working day of fourteen hours (and more), minimal budgets for projects 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 obligations 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 operating 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, cutting 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 media 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.

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17 *Mike Hentz Works* 4.

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

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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

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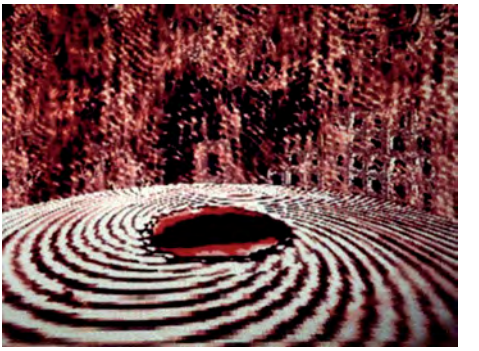

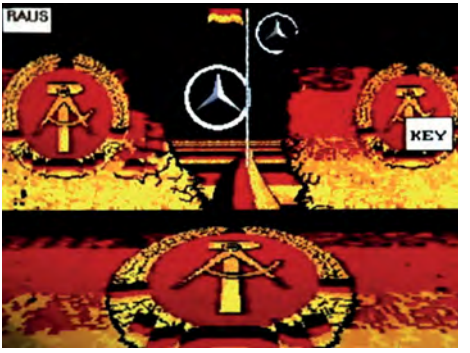

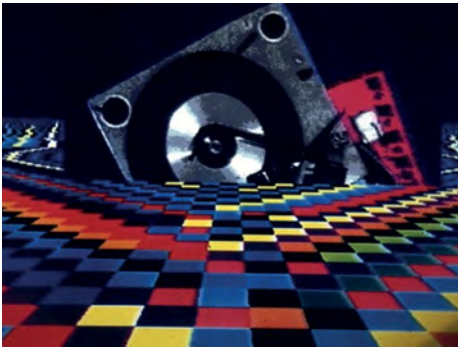

Screenshots from Hotel Pompino

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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

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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 television projects; this they found at documenta. As a consequence of the scandal, 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 Hamburg 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

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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

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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

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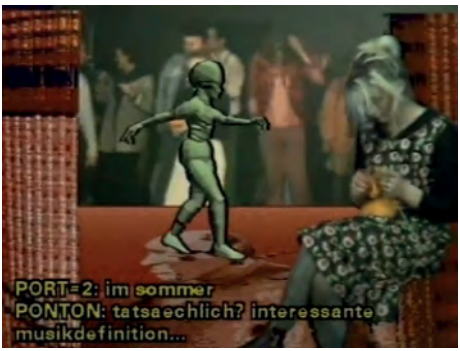

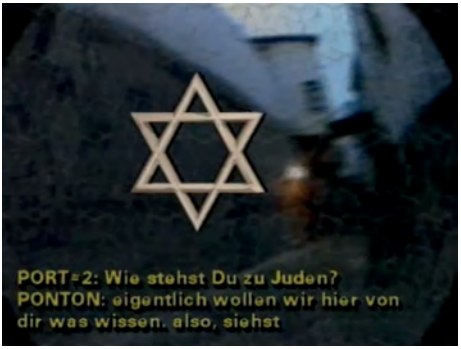

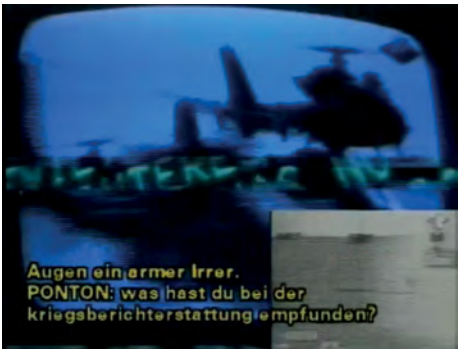

Screenshots from Ballroom TV

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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

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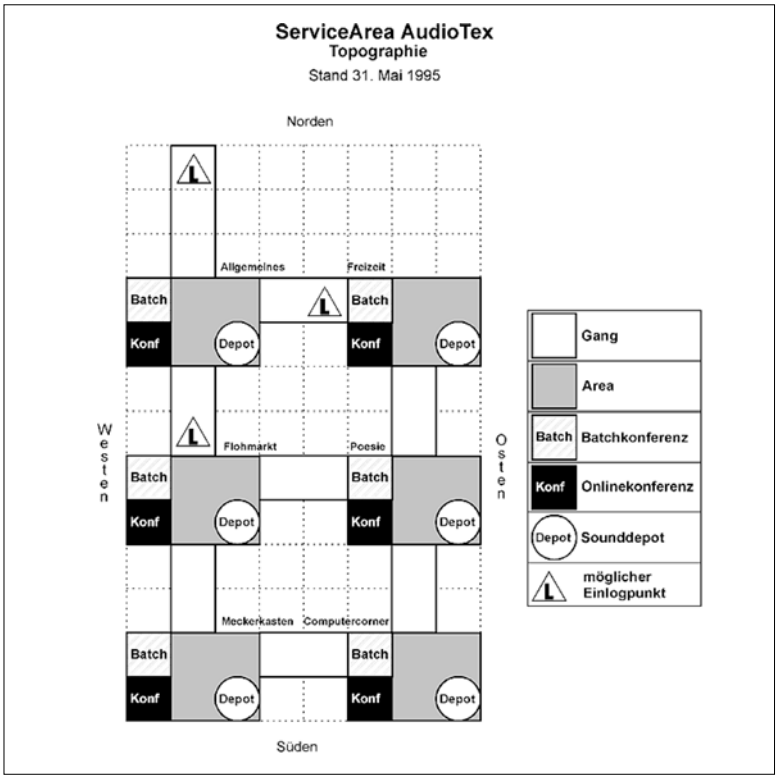

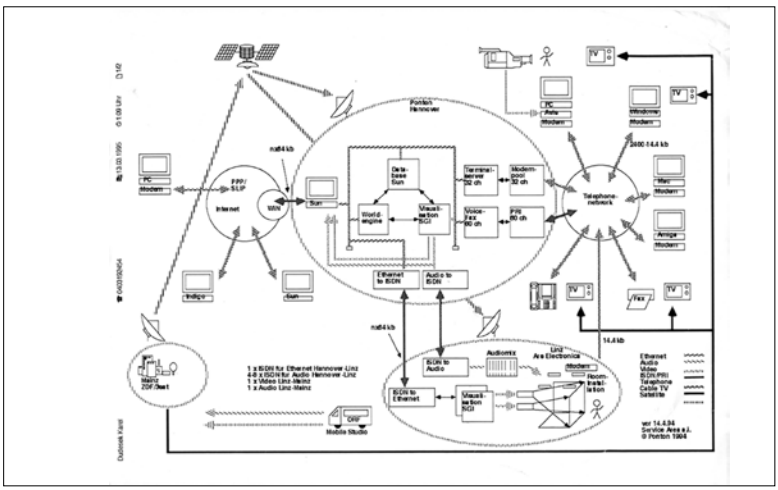

Two diagrams of Service Area i. a.

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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.

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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

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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.

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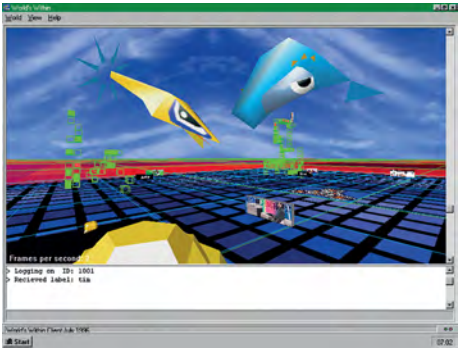

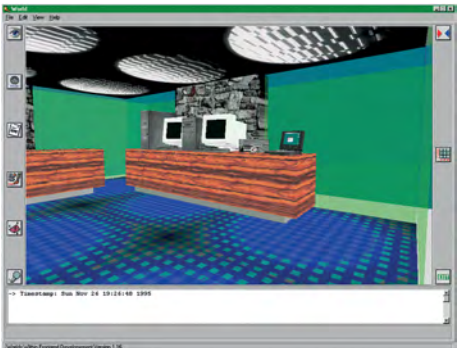

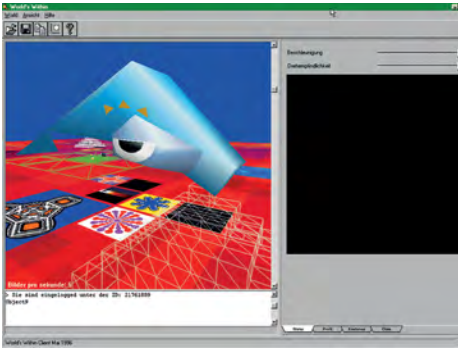

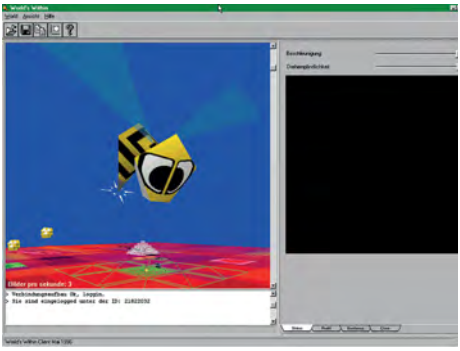

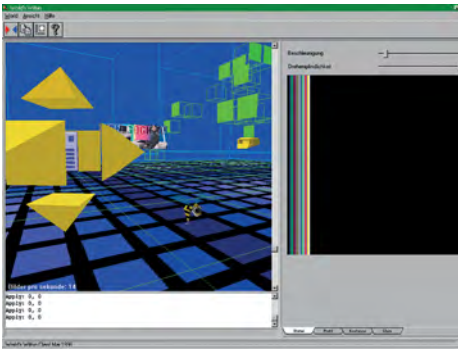

Screenshots Worlds Within

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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

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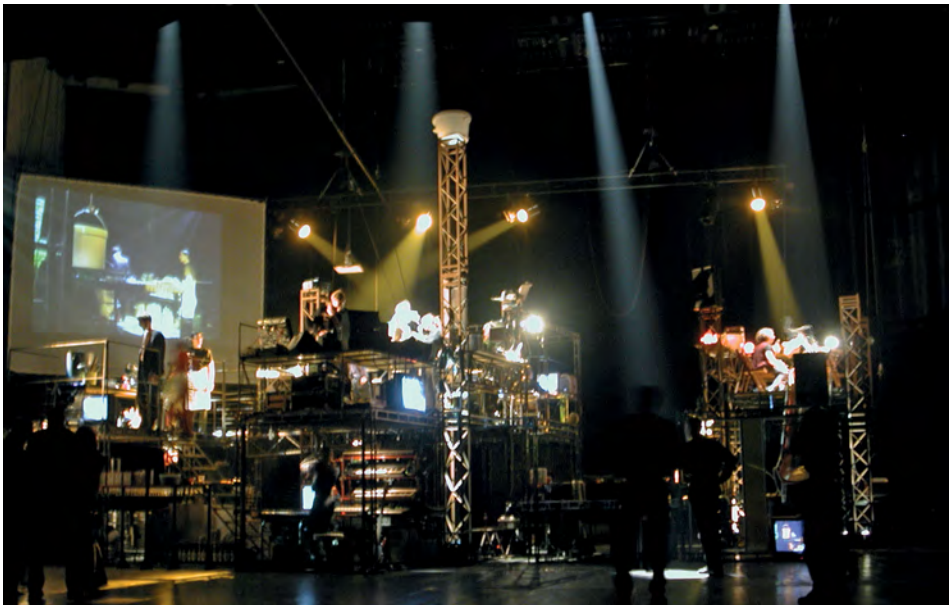

Club Automatique 2010 in Hérouville
Photo: Gerald Couty

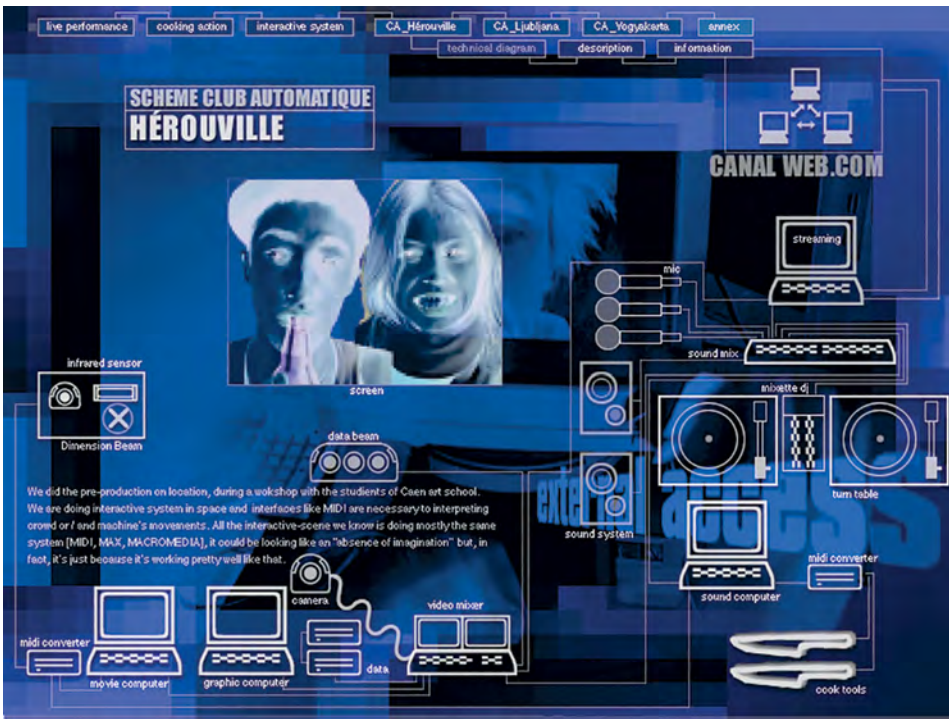

Diagram Club Automatique Heroeville

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

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3 The making of *Piazza virtuale*

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

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

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

***

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

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

1 Interview with Salvatore Vanasco, 8 June 2018.

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

***

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

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

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

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

2 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

3 Interview with Klaus Peter Dencker, 21 February 2019.

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

This attitude is described in the documenta catalogue:

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

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

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

7 Minutes of a meeting on 11 February 1992.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2 Two kinds of interactivity

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

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

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

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

13 Jones, *Encyclopedia*, p. 242.

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 Ibid.

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460665 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 How did the piazza come to documenta?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

19 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 Interview with Benjamin Heidersberger, 14 April 2018.

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

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

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

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

26 Interview with Karel Dudesek, 14 April 2018.

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

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3.6 The Dörnhof meetings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

31 Agenda, Dörnberg/Kassel, 3 February 1992.

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

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

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

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

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

33 Minutes, Dörnberg, Thursday.

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

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

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

3.7 Public relations and marketing

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

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

35 Doernberg final summary, 8 March 1992.

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

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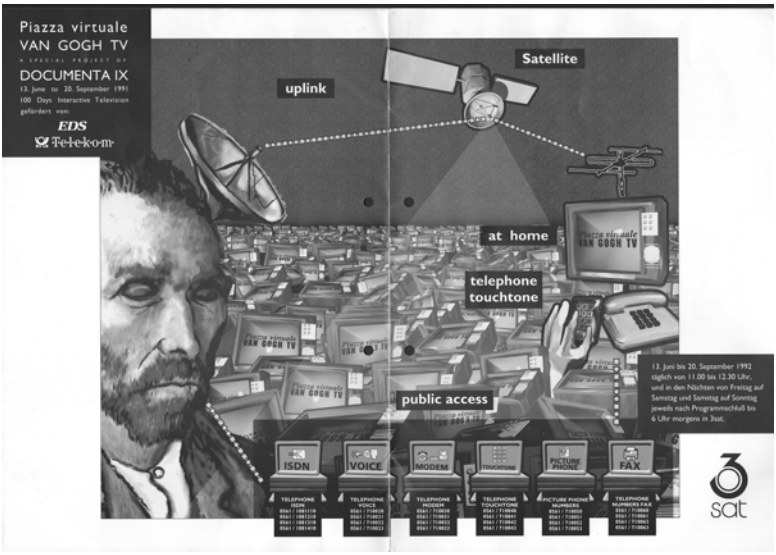

Advertising for Piazza virtuale

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

39 Press release for the meeting on 11 February 1992.

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

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

3.8 Sponsoring

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Mike Hentz at the Piazzaetta in Riga
Photo: Janis Deinarts

3.9 The international Piazzettas

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

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

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

3.10 In Kassel at last

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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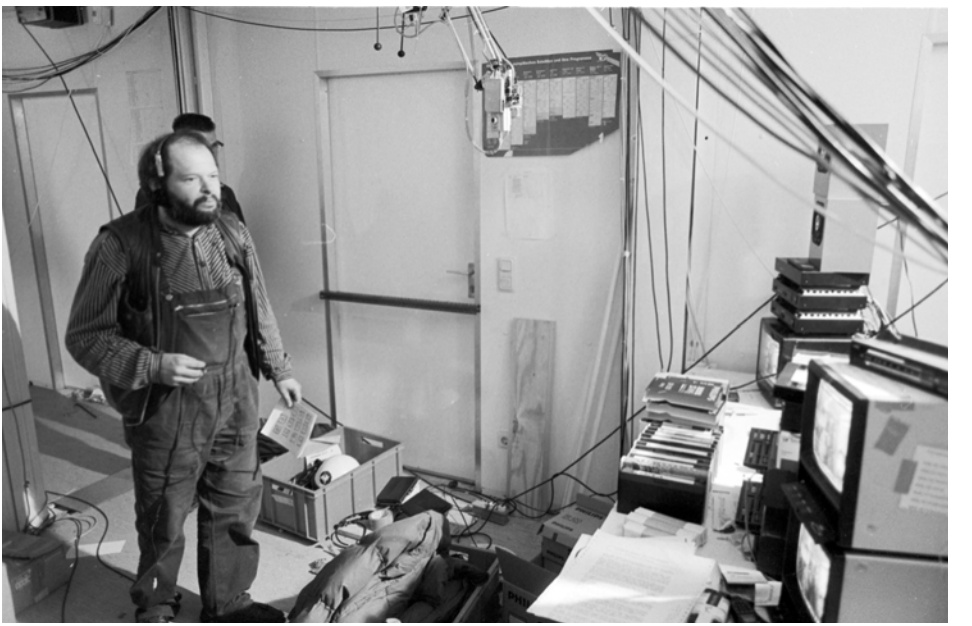

Wau Holland of Chaos Computer Club visits Piazza virtuale.
Photo: altschaffel.com

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

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

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

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

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

1 Interview with Christine Klappert, 20 February 2019.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Interview with Kathrin Brinkmann, 7 May 2018.

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

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

4.1 An early example of content moderation

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

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

4 Interview with Brinkmann.

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

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

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

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

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

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

5 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

6 Interview with Brinkmann.

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

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Team meeting between the containers
Photo: altschaffel.com

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

For those who had to operate this technology, the feelings were more ambivalent. Nicolas Baginsky, who helped construct the robot camera, remembers his time in Kassel:

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

8 Letter from Van Gogh TV to the "dear visitors", 5 June 1992.

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

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

He also remembers an intense working atmosphere:

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

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

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

10 Interview with Nicolas Baginsky, 21 February 2019.

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

12 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

13 Interview with Katrin Brinkmann, 7 May 2018.

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4.2 "Hello TV"

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

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

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

14 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

4.3 The fans

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

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

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

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

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

4.4 *Sendeschluss* (end of broadcast)

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

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

18 Interview with Salvatore Vanasco, 8 June 2018.

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

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

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

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

Press officer Ludwig Seyfarth
Photo: altschaffel.com

19 Ibid.

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

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5 "The show is as intelligent as its audience": The reception of *Piazza virtuale*

Piazza virtuale was not a ratings hit, but it had a sizeable audience, which was not a given for a niche programme on a cable-only channel. The programmes were usually seen by 10,000 viewers in the first month of the programme, according to data from the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK), which was between 0.6 and 1 per cent of the total audience, depending on the day.[1]

These numbers are not an indicator of the success or popularity of the show due to the survey procedure. But they do show that *Piazza virtuale* was not a flop despite its style, contradicting all viewing habits. This chapter is about the reception of the show, which includes not only the ratings and statistics on the number of callers, but also the reactions of the press and the audience. While press coverage is rich and well recorded (3sat's press office published a collection of all press reports in March 1993, which included more than 150 articles from the German and international press[2]), the reaction of individual viewers who were not professional journalists is more difficult to assess in retrospect. Conclusions can be drawn here from a survey conducted by the Kassel local newspaper *HNA*, but also from the comments published in the social medium of the time: the Usenet discussion groups, which will be addressed in the conclusion of this book.

1 The surviving ratings are available on the website of our research project: http://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/quoten-piazza-virtuale.pdf

2 http://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Presse_Van-Gogh.pdf

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5.1 Ratings and caller statistics

According to the final press documentation, the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK) measured an average of between 10,000 and 30,000 viewers daily for *Piazza virtuale* on 3sat in Germany, and between 20,000 and 60,000 viewers for reception via satellite and in Austria and Switzerland.

Such ratings were normal for 3sat's morning shows; the broadcast of the literature award Ingeborg Bachmann Preis, the ORF noon news show or the 3sat financial news also had comparable ratings, while GfK recorded no measurable audience figures at all for other 3sat shows at this time. In the evening, however, feature films or reruns of popular programmes such as the game show *Dalli Dalli*, soap opera *Diese Drombusch* or police drama *Der Alte* had market shares of up to 10 per cent or audience figures of up to a million. Detailed ratings information is only available for the first month of *Piazza virtuale*, so it is not possible to clarify whether the ratings rose or fell during the 100-day broadcasting period.

The possibility of calling *Piazza virtuale* was apparently in great demand. Viewers from that time remember that it was possible to dial the show's number non-stop during the entire broadcast without ever getting through.

Reporters at the press preview at documenta
Photo: altschaffel.com

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According to the recollection of some *Piazza virtuale* staffers, the number of callers once even overloaded Kassel's telephone network.[3]

A report for the sponsor Telekom from 1 September 1992 contains some interesting figures about the callers:

> According to measurements by the telecommunications office in Kassel, which has a new ISDN exchange, over 110,000 calls are made per hour … The figures allow us to estimate that 10 to 20 per cent of the viewers actually try to participate actively in the programme. After 80 days of broadcasting, 105,000 viewers have dialled into the programme and actively participated in programmes. Due to the high number of participants, released lines are immediately occupied, generating the expected telephone fee units for Telekom.[4]

The commitment as a sponsor had thus paid off handsomely for Telekom – which had provided no financial support but only technical services and equipment. As the report points out: "A further stimulation of telephone traffic results from the fact that telephone numbers shared via *Piazza virtuale* encourage viewers to communicate with each other. According to our tests, for example, between 10 and 50 responses come to a displayed fax number."[5]

5.2 Press reports before *Piazza virtuale*

The intensive work of the press team of *Piazza virtuale* paid off: *Piazza virtuale* was covered by most of the main newspapers and magazines. In *Spiegel*, *Piazza virtuale* was honoured in advance with a two-page article by Claudius Seidl.[6] In addition to a detailed background text in its TV supplement *sternTV*,[7] *Stern* awarded a "Star of the Week" to Karel Dudesek.[8] *Bild*[9] and *Süd-*

3 Interview with Christian Wolff, 22 May 2018.

4 Interim report to the sponsor Telekom, 1 September 1992.

5 Interim report, Telekom.

6 Seidl, Claudius, "Die imaginäre Pizza", *Der Spiegel*, 18 May 1992, pp. 268–269f.

7 *StarTV* 24, 1992.

8 *Star* 35, 1992.

9 "100 Tage TV der Zukunft", *Bild*, 18 May 1992, p. 19.

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deutsche Zeitung[10] reported on the project, and so did the city magazines, such as *Prinz*[11] or *Tip*,[12] that were important at the time. The spectrum of magazines interested in *Piazza virtuale* ranged from lifestyle and music magazines such as *Tempo*[13] and *Spex*[14] to art magazines like *Artis*[15] and even architecture magazine *Baumeister*,[16] from computer magazines such as *Mac News*[17] and *PC Praxis*[18] to industry rags like *EPD Kirche und Rundfunk*[19] or *Telekom-Monitor*.[20] Even *Keys*, a trade journal for keyboard players, found a reason to write about *Piazza virtuale*.[21] On television, MTV and Premiere, among others, reported on *Piazza virtuale*.

In cities where Piazzettas existed, the local press often also wrote about the local mini-studio. The *taz* in Bremen, for example, reported three times on the Piazzetta in the city[22] – in addition to an article in the national edition – although it was only on the air five times. Other articles about the Bremen *Piazza telematica* appeared in the daily *Weserkurier*, the city magazines *Bremer*, *Weserreport* and *Prinz Bremen*,[23] and the local news programme *Buten un Binnen* of Radio Bremen also sent a reporter to the improvised Piazzetta studio at Bremen University of the Arts.

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10 "Neue Trends, neue Themen, neue Ismen, 'documenta' – total: die Kunstausstellung im Fernsehprogramm", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13/14 June 1992.

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

12 Liebherr, Christoph, "Kaffeehaus Van Gogh", *Tip* 17, 1992.

13 Renner, Karl-Hinrich, "Digitale Demokratie", *Tempo*, 6 June 1992.

14 Hermes, Manfred, "Leih mir dein Ohr, leih mir dein Auge, Vincent", *Spex* 9, 1992.

15 Ohrt, Roberto, "Van Gogh TV", *Artis*, June 1992.

16 Seyfarth, Ludwig, "Die Architektur der Piazza Virtuale", *Baumeister* 9, 1992.

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

18 "Haf: Fernsehen zum Mitmachen", *PC Praxis* 9, 1992.

19 "Techno-Dumdum. 'Piazza Virtuale' auf 3sat: 100 Tage Langeweile", *EPD Church and Radio* no. 49, 24 June 1992.

20 "Fernsehen zum Selbermachen", *Telekom-Monitor* 8, 1992.

21 "MultiMedia-Spektakel zur Documenta 9", *Keys* 4, July/August 1992.

22 "UrDrü: Gelegenheit sehr, Anlaß weniger", *die tageszeitung/Bremen*, 10 August 1992; Hippen, Wilfried, "Bremen so blaß wie Riga spannend", *die tageszeitung/Bremen*, 24 August 1992; Hippen, Wilfried, "Die Ferngesehenen: Jeder darf mal ins TV", *die tageszeitung/Bremen*, 13 July 1992.

23 "Ther: Bremen weltweit auf Sendung", *Kurier am Sonntag*, 23 August 1992; Heldt, Ina, "Piazza Virtuale live auf 3sat", *Bremer* 8, 1992; "fc: Per Bild-Telefon dabei sein", *Weser-Report* 8, 1992; Fischer, Frauke, "Bremen grüßt Kassel", *Prinz Bremen*, 8, 1992.

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The advance coverage of *Piazza virtuale* was largely factual, often sympathetic and positive. What is striking is the willingness of the media to report without seeing a preview of the planned show and only on the basis of the information provided by the makers – after all, what would actually be on television only emerged when the show was broadcast. Some of the authors were apparently so convinced of the concept that they opened up a theoretical-aesthetic framework for the project without any basis in their own experience. Apparently, both the relevance of the content and the sheer technical feasibility seemed so self-evident that the writers wanted to formulate their own thoughts about a show that did not yet exist and would only emerge from the participation of the audience.

Particularly interesting here are the articles published by Claudius Seidl in *Spiegel* and Klaus Bartels in *Page*. Bartels was able to persuade a professor of German literature from Hamburg University who was interested in media theory and digital media to contribute to the design magazine *Page*. His text offers a good overview of the topics and approaches that were under discussion at the beginning of the 1990s and mentions authors such as Marvin Minsky and Hans Moravec, Peter Weibel and William Gibson, Brenda Laurel and Timothy Leary, Bertolt Brecht and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.[24]

Among the buzzwords in his text are terms omnipresent at the time, such as virtual reality and cyberspace, telepresence and hypertext, convergence and interactivity. The text is in part a time capsule of the debate of the time about an imminent media future, in which media theorists and propagandists outdid themselves in describing and embellishing this future with elegant metaphors or by invoking historical references.[25]

Claudius Seidl, who published a two-page article about the project in *Der Spiegel* barely a month before *Piazza virtuale* went on air, also had to write his announcement on the show based on what its makers told him beforehand. That didn't stop him from declaring *Piazza virtuale* to be part of a great upheaval in television culture: "The audience breaks the power of the broadcasters, the viewers make their own programmes, the screen becomes accessible for everyone who has something to say."[26] After a reference to Brecht's

24 Bartels, Klaus, "Virtueller Honig", *Page* 6, 1992, pp. 4–11.

25 The anthology edited by Manfred Waffender – *Cyberspace: Ausflüge in virtuelle Wirklichkeiten*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991 – is a representative overview of such texts.

26 Seidl, "Die imaginäre Pizza", *Der Spiegel*, p. 268.

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radio theory, Seidl describes how in *Piazza virtuale* "television is to become a setting for strolling, chatting, acting, easily accessible and as cheerful as the marketplace of an Italian town".[27] Ultimately he comes to the conclusion: "*Piazza virtuale* prepares the deconstruction of television, it mocks the laws of the medium, just as deconstructivist architecture mocks the laws of gravity – and for that reason alone it is a work of art at the height of our postmodern times."[28]

5.3 The press coverage during *Piazza virtuale*

How did the press react to a TV programme that was loftily announced as "a kind of electronic pedestrian zone for street hawkers, virtual bums, onlookers, preachers, street painters, shoppers, tourists and musicians",[29] but soon after its launch was nicknamed "Hello TV"? Interestingly, the positive reactions came mainly from technically oriented media. The magazine *PC Professional*, for example, in a special issue on the subject of "Multimedia", found that the show "was still in the absolute early stages, but shows the direction in which multimedia can and will change everyday life in the near future".[30] And the industry publication *Telekom Monitor* said: "All the completely new and unfamiliar impressions that flickered across the screen … and that at times were also creepily distorted or did not yet function in a completely coherent manner, were in their entirety more exciting than many an American series."[31]

Possibly because the writers were able to assess the technical complexity of *Pizza virtuale* or because they simply had high hopes for the "interactive future" of television, the show's weak points were excused in technically oriented magazines because of its potential. The trade journal *Professional Produktion* wrote:

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Müller, "Kabel, Chaos und Kultur", *MacUp*, p. 5.

30 *PC Professional Extra Multimedia*, 1992.

31 *Telekom Monitor* 8, 1992.

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Karel Dudesek talks about Piazza virtuale at the press conference. In the background the logos of some of the sponsors of the show
Photo: altschaffel.com

> The idea is good and important, but in its present form interactive television is still a toy for computer freaks and self-promoters. Those who have managed to get in only produce redundancy. Communication as a meaningful exchange of information, which can be important and informative but also just entertaining, does not take place here. The complete rejection of the sender/receiver constellation of television, and thus the rejection of playing prepared contributions, place *Piazza virtuale* in the corner of artistic experiments. Nevertheless, these experiments will go down in media history.[32]

But the unusual programme was of course also met with rejection in some quarters. The newspaper *Neue Westfälische* found it "simply boring and stupid".[33] *Süddeutsche* commented:

> Simple minds, who articulate themselves electronically like graffiti artists, are of course also part of the show. And when someone bursts in quite unsuspec-

32 Singer, Harald, "Elektronische Kunst auf der documenta 9", *Professional Produktion*, 8, 1992.
33 "Lili: Dresden grüßt Köln", *Neue Westfälische*, 16 June 1992.

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> tingly, he has this to say from Seligenstadt: "What's the show about?" No answer, just a request from the off to speak English. What's it all about is probably also asked by the silent majority of those who don't pick up the phone, but merely press the button on the remote control to find the next game show.[34]

Die Welt observed: "It becomes clear that the most important motivation for taking part is self-expression, or to hear one's voice on TV when it says naughty things."[35] *Hamburger Rundschau* summed it up succinctly: "The programme is as intelligent as its audience."[36]

In some reviews, *Piazza virtuale* was accused of being overly fixated on technology. "Enormous logistics for a harmless playground!" was the verdict of the Berlin city magazine *zitty*, which included a list of all the sponsors mentioned in the programme's credits, which took up almost an entire column.[37] "The media games are voluntary laboratory experiments to increase the efficiency of industrial media technology", wrote *Tagesspiegel*.[38] NZZ shared this perspective: "Most of it is predetermined by an invisible 'machine'; accordingly, the individual feels like a rat in a rigid experimental facility that is not transparent to them."[39] And the music magazine *Spex* agreed: "In a happy, because powerful, position are those who sit in the Van Gogh TV container and can fiddle around with the many marvellous, sponsored devices … Ultimately it will be service providers like the sex industry that can do something practical based on this research."[40]

Some reviews emphasise the failure of the media utopia that wanted to turn consumers into producers: "It turned out, however, that the viewers, who had advanced to become participants, often didn't know what to do with their newly won freedom. The medium was too new, and there were fears of contact that sometimes led to speechlessness or real nonsense."[41]

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34 Pardey, Hans-Heinrich, "Verlorene Hallorufe auf der virtuellen Piazza", *Süddeutsche* 14 July 1992.

35 Schwerin, Christoph, "Interaktives Fernsehen", *Welt*, 19 June 1992.

36 Anonymous, "Flimmerkiste für Sesselschläfer", *Hamburger Rundschau*, no date.

37 "Teo: Piazza Virtuale. Fernseh-Computer-Telefon-Spielplatz", *zitty* 17, 1992.

38 Vogel, Sabine, "Kommunikationsfluss in die andere Richtung", *Tagesspiegel* 16 August 1992.

39 "Ras: Rückblick auf Sendungen der Woche. 'Piazza Virtuale'? Blabla reale", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28/29 June 1992.

40 Hermes, "Leih mir dein Ohr, leih mir dein Auge".

41 Krajewski, Peter, "Im Chaos aber blüht der Geist", *pablo*, no date.

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5.4 The audience survey

The reaction of the public is far less easy to document than published opinion. That is why the survey that the Kassel local newspaper *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine* (HNA) conducted among its readers in August is so interesting. With the help of a competition, the public's opinion of the programme was to be determined – this in itself was an indication that *Piazza virtuale* was noticed and discussed in Kassel and at documenta. The editors' summary: "The response was extremely divided, but the majority was positive. Incidentally, many readers complained that they had tried several times to participate in the show but never got through." From the positive submissions, the article quotes the following voices: "'Short and simple: Your programme is great. We will miss you very much!' – 'My fingers itched every time to pick up the phone to be there live.' 'I've spent many a night tossing and turning just to see this wacky programme'."[42]

But of course there was criticism, too:

> People often complained about the confusion on the screen, several readers wrote that at first they thought there was a malfunction. Others accused the makers of not having provided enough information about the show and the opportunities to participate in advance. One summarised it as follows: "Idea good, execution messy, result incomprehensible." … Criticism was also levelled at unimaginative participants: "If you don't know how to say more than 'hello', you shouldn't make that known to the public", said one young woman.

Other letters expressed the hope that sponsors would be found to continue *Piazza virtuale* after the end of documenta.

42 These and the following quotations from "Hpo: Praise and Blame for Participatory TV", 30 August 1992.

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Inside the container studio of Piazza virtuale
Photo: altschaffel.com

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6 Conclusion: "Through the telephone lines a desire, formless and unaware of itself"

Considering the scope of *Piazza virtuale* as well as the extensive press coverage during its broadcasts, it is astonishing that there were hardly any final reports on this ground-breaking artistic television experiment. The press work had ended with the conclusion of the project and no longer stimulated any such final reflections of its own accord; but even the media, which had reported on *Piazza virtuale* several times, did not publish any final analysis.

All the more important, therefore, are three detailed, subsequent reports: the anonymous article "Auf der *Piazza virtuale*", which appeared in the weekend supplement of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 14 November 1991 – and thus almost two months after the end of *Piazza virtuale* – a detailed analysis in the magazine *Pablo*,[1] and a long report in the US magazine *Wired* from 1993. We will look at these texts, before offering some final observations based on our research.

6.1 A place of first contact

The article from the *Süddeutsche* newspaper is remarkable not only because it is practically the only detailed, journalistic reappraisal of *Piazza virtuale*, but also because it combines a sympathetic point of view with a critical attention to detail. These observations make it clear that the anonymous writer

1 Krajewski, Peter, "Im Chaos aber blüht der Geist", *pablo*, no date. This text was found in the collection of articles compiled by the ZDF press office after the end of the project, that is available on the website of our project: http://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Presse_Van-Gogh.pdf

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has watched *Piazza virtuale* regularly. Unlike most other writers, his text is characterised by an understanding of the utopian component of the project, which at the same time does not blind him to the shortcomings of the show. He is explicitly concerned with compensating for the lack of discursive attention to the project: "Television critics hardly noticed *Piazza virtuale*, if only because this programme was only shown on 3sat for an hour and a half at noon and on the Berlin cable channelFAB at night", the text begins. "To the few critics who took a brief look, it seemed so chaotic that they mostly dismissed it as a 'trivial, unimportant experiment'."[2]

This is not to say that he was not as disappointed with the level of conversation at *Piazza virtuale* as many other commentators. However, the text is informed by an understanding that trying to start a mass conversation on television had an important influence on those interactions. The author not only repeatedly highlights the role of the BBS users, but also states:

> An inkling of universal togetherness, of "All men become brothers", vagabonded through the virtual space. Sometimes you even got an idea of what interactive television could become if you reserved a cable channel for it within a city area, for example: a bulletin board for party and demo dates, a place of first contact, which can lead to actual, physical contact.[3]

For the shows on 3sat, however, his judgement is much more critical:

> It was as if the people on the phones put out feelers to others, but shied away from making serious contact as they would from an embarrassing touch. They want to show themselves, but still remain anonymous: So they stuck to first names and hacker pseudonyms, to "How are you?" and "Where are you from?", to any number of questions that sooner or later led to the dead end of "Doesn't anyone have anything to say?" Through the telephone lines a desire for the *Piazza virtuale* forced its way in, apparently still formless, unaware of itself. Most callers did not know what to say, but they wanted to be there, to be part of it. Something was going to happen – only what?[4]

2 "Auf der 'Piazza Virtuale'", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14/15 November 1992.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

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The author also criticises the attempts of the creators of the show to lead the discussions and set priorities:

> But the Kassel media artists … did not trust the spirits they had called up … In any case, some of the *Piazza virtuale* coordinators, especially Salvatore Vanasco, slipped into the role of animators. They gave topics for the callers to talk about – whether they wanted to or not. Sometimes they were asked to tell how they felt when they danced, other times what they thought about violence against foreigners. But the callers only played along half-heartedly and reluctantly, and hardly anything came out except diffuse chit-chat about their feelings.[5]

The posthumous analysis of *Piazza virtuale* accurately summarises the conceptual problems of the project, without denying that it was part of an emerging media development:

> The 100 days of *Piazza virtuale* at least proved that there is a strong demand for interactive television. The other lesson to be learned from this experiment is that this demand cannot be satisfied with the offerings of the Kassel troupe. From the bird's-eye view of long-term technology policy, *Piazza virtuale* is likely to prove that the idea of television as an open event for everyone is a dead end: Television as an offering for many and television as an offering by many seem to exclude each other. At any rate, the Kassel artists have spared the corporations from having to explore this dead end by themselves.[6]

The essay in the design magazine *Pablo* also emphasises the possibilities of free interaction that were inherent in the format, but at the same time points out that Van Gogh TV did not stick to this concept:

> During live shows, moderators occasionally appeared (but only acoustically) who gave the participants specific instructions or acted as interpreters in the dialogue with foreign participants. Sometimes questions were put into the mouth of a participant when he couldn't think of anything clever to say. The question inevitably arises as to whether this did not deprive the voiceless

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

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> person of the chance to find something to say. These ad hoc changes simply resulted from the dilemma that 100 days to test a new form of communication very soon proved to be too short.[7]

The same author, however, also had a good eye for the moments when the audience empowered itself despite the given format and the attempts to control the discourse: "A participant with the pseudonym 'Booty', for example, appeared more and more frequently over time on the computer chat, sometimes participating in the drawing programme, asking afterwards in the *Coffeehouse* how his work had been liked, and generally moving very self-confidently through the show. An example that at least individual viewers had emancipated themselves into participants."[8]

The reportage that appeared six months later in the newly founded American magazine *Wired* is a blueprint for the kind of hype with which the paper was to report on American IT companies over the next two decades – except that here a European art project became the subject of the kind of prose that soon earned *Wired* the accusation of serving as the central organ of an unleashed, neoliberal internet ideology. The paper, which had been developed by its founders Louis Rossetto and Jane Metcalfe as a "*Rolling Stone* for technology", had made it its business to describe the cultural, social and political effects of digitalisation.[9]

The internet, which would eventually bring the most significant changes and redeem many of the hopes for the future triggered by other technologies, was still little known at that time. (On 30 April 1993 – around the time the May issue of *Wired* with the story about Van Gogh TV hit the news stands – Tim Berners-Lee published his software for the World Wide Web, an important step in bringing the internet to the masses. Apparently, Van Gogh TV even had an internet connection in its container studio in Kassel during *Piazza virtuale*, but did not use it for the show.)

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7 Krajewski, "Im Chaos aber blüht der Geist".

8 Ibid.

9 Other articles in this issue – in which the Internet is repeatedly referred to as the "Matrix" – are about, among other things, Japanese game designer Tsuyoshi Takashiro's game *Wacky Races* for the unsuccessful 3DO game console, the virtual reality installation *The Cave*, the robot performance group Survival Research Laboratories, and emoticons, the "combinations of letters sometimes found at the end of email messages that are the online counterpart of body language".

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Because the internet was still little known at that time, the work of Van Gogh TV seemed to confirm many of the prophecies and predictions of the future that were being discussed at the time about digital and interactive media. With *Piazza virtuale* they had, according to *Wired*, "driven a stake through the sclerotic heart of that 50-year-old bloodsucker, television"; the group had aimed at "new collaborative art forms, new political and social forms of organisation and the creation of a true 'communicatopia'".[10]

6.2 Voices from the internet

It is interesting to see how the few voices "from the internet" that made direct reference to *Piazza virtuale* assessed the project. On 22 June 1992, at 1.13 p.m., Lothar Fritsch, a computer science student at Saarland University, posted a detailed text about *Piazza virtuale* in the newsgroup de.soc.kultur. These newsgroups were, at that time, the fora for debate on the internet – a forerunner of the social media of the present.

After long descriptions of various broadcast segments, he comes to this conclusion: "Anyone who has access to the internet can safely forget about *Piazza virtuale*. For someone who uses IRC, plays MUD, gets a few megabytes of software via FTP between work and dinner while reading the news or does everything via X-Win at the same time, *Piazza* is a bitter disappointment."[11] Fritsch proves himself to be an internet expert by mentioning in detail just about all the internet protocols that were available to a small cast of computer specialists before the introduction of the World Wide Web. For him, *Piazza virtuale* obviously could not replace the forms of communication he had got to know on the internet.

Even in an online discussion that unfolded between 2 and 18 July in the newsgroup de.comm.misc, the assessment of *Piazza virtuale* is rather reserved. Bernd Raschke, for example, emphasises: "As a computer science student, you have certainly already got used to dealing with email, ftp, irc, etc., but many people have not had such experiences. I think this virtual pizza :-) is a successful gag."[12] Manuel Friedrich has this to say:

10 Marshall, "The Medium is the Mission".

11 en.soc.kultur, 22 June 1992.

12 de.comm.misc, 6 June 1992.

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> In my opinion, VGTV is already part of the culture – the communication culture. Everything that happens on the internet, in the mailboxes or even on BTX is unknown to the majority of the population. When someone comes along and puts it on the TV screen in such a concentrated way and even gives everyone the opportunity to take part, then the whole thing has something culture-shaping about it. After all, we are dealing here with new forms of communication that are being tested. The fact that only crap comes out of it is more the fault of the users than of the providers.[13]

6.3 Was *Piazza virtuale* a social medium?

Was it really the fault of the users that only crap came out of *Piazza virtuale*? Or were Van Gogh TV's design decisions and the structure of the show to blame? Technical choices in the design of platforms are never neutral, but influence the kind of interaction they make possible.

Realised utopias are probably always a disappointment; especially when – as in the case of *Piazza virtuale* – they are so quickly overtaken by reality. A hypothesis that stood at the beginning of the research on *Piazza virtuale* was that the format was an early form of a social medium. By returning to this initial question and comparing the kind of interaction that was possible at *Piazza virtuale* with that which takes place today on the internet, I want to provide a concluding assessment of the project.

It would be too easy to make the point that *Piazza virtuale* was a failed attempt to organise the kind of individual and distributed communication that is typical of the internet as a mass medium. This had already been noticed by attentive observers in 1992. In the magazine *Ohne Titel* an anonymous author wrote:

> It seems as if television is to be forcibly turned into something that contradicts its actual structure. The result is a version of the television, for which there is actually no need … Despite all the criticism, however, the positive aspect of Van Gogh TV must not be overlooked: The *Piazza virtuale* … makes the one-dimensionality of its communication obvious. It explores the possibilities of television and reaches its limits. The intention of the makers of Van

13 de.comm.misc, 7 June 1992.

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> Gogh TV to break up the viewer's isolation, his passive attitude, his renunciation of real social contacts and to instead open up possibilities of intervention, self-determination and two-way communication is therefore fully justified.[14]

After a quarter of a century of internet, we know that television was not the appropriate medium for this type of communication. Nevertheless, *Piazza virtuale* enabled some of the activities that are the bread and butter of contemporary internet culture. These characteristics of internet culture include the creation or exchange of information, ideas, professional interests and other types of self-expression, as noted in a recent article that reviewed the relevant literature and identified common characteristics of current social media services. Another trait of social media is the production of user-generated content and the fact that it enables the development of social networks through which users connect with other individuals and groups.[15]

All of this is also true of *Piazza virtuale*: in various ways, users could get involved in the show and thus exchange information and communicate with each other. This occasionally also led to contacts that went beyond the medium or even to the creation of virtual communities like that of the *Piazza virtuale* fans who called in regularly and who even travelled together to Kassel to be present during production of the show.

But contacts were also made among the callers and by fax that went beyond the broadcast. As a report to Telekom notes, the insertion of a fax with a telephone number led to a good number of calls: "According to our tests, for example, a broadcast fax number leads to between 10 and 50 responses."[16] This feature did not play a major role for the show because it was live. While today's social media have archived the contact information for their users in a database, at *Piazza virtuale* telephone numbers were not recorded. Interestingly, viewers of *Piazza virtuale* were already looking for a way around for this problem: time and again, callers to *Coffeehouse* asked users of mailbox

14 "Van Gogh TV", *Untitled IX Journal for Enigmatic Art Appreciation*, no date.

15 Obar, Jonathan A.; Wildman, Steve, "Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue", *Telecommunications Policy* 39 (9), pp. 745–750. The paper identifies two other characteristics that obviously do not apply to *Piazza virtuale*: that social media are Web 2.0 internet-based applications, and that users create service-specific profiles.

16 Interim report, Telecom.

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to write their telephone number in the chat so that it would be visible on the screen for a longer period of time.

However, in *Piazza virtuale* it was structurally impossible to implement this kind of audience feedback. The "self-generating" character of the show did not go so far as to allow the audience to influence the structure; they had to accept what was offered. This also sets the show apart from offerings on the internet, which at the time was being developed by its users to suit their needs and interests. This kind of swarm intelligence, which really made the internet an autopoetic system, could not be harnessed by *Piazza virtuale*. Van Gogh TV had proclaimed that its work was the channel it created and that the content came from the audience – but in order to be really successful, the audience would have had to be able to influence the channel itself.

So, paradoxically, *Piazza virtuale* was simultaneously too open and too closed. Four callers randomly thrown together do not necessarily have common interests that could lead to a meaningful conversation. At the same time, the level of conversation on *Piazza virtuale* always did rise when there was common ground among the callers, as with the aforementioned tech-savvy satellite audience that watched the show during the Olympus broadcasts. With segments that had a thematic brief, such as *Marketplace*, the level of engagement and intensity of communication increased. At that time, the internet had already developed methods to bring together interest groups, for example the newsgroups, later web forums or user groups in social media.

In the Introduction, I pointed to the empowerment and DIY ethic of punk, the inclusion of the audience in performance art and the artistic critique of the traditional workplace as the roots of Van Gogh TV's work, which led to a "new spirit of capitalism". The ability of the audience to move "from consumer to producer" (Brecht) was indeed the aim of *Piazza virtuale*. But this was nevertheless subject to great restrictions in the actual show.

The limits and problems of audience involvement in the performance art of Ponton predecessor Minus Delta t were taken to a logical conclusion by *Piazza virtuale*. Already with Minus Delta t, the possibilities for audience participation were limited to reacting to the group's provocations. The artistic goal of Minus Delta t might have been to "create situations" that would turn the spectator into a participant, as called for by Guy Debord. However, the practice was often so confrontational that it left the audience with little choice with regard to their reactions. A similar pattern emerged at *Piazza virtuale*. Here, however, the audience often chose not to engage in the intended

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fashion with the possibilities to interact offered by the show. *Piazza virtuale* was not as "self-generating" or "autopoetic" as its creators had wanted it to be. Eventually, the internet gave its users more flexible structures for interaction and self-expression.

Today, the business models of many internet companies are built on just this kind of interaction and self-expression – which brings us to the last point: *Piazza virtuale* was not organised by a company, but by an artists' group and public broadcaster that were not profit-oriented, but committed to a common good. It was the last time a public broadcaster in Germany was involved in building an infrastructure for a communications network beyond radio and television. Afterwards, this field of operation was left completely to the forces of the free market, and the consequences are well known: Social media companies such as Facebook, YouTube or Telegram, whose business model is based on polarisation, radicalisation and lack of responsibility, play an important role in the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories and crackpot propaganda.

That the emergence of a new form of publicity should not be left to profit-driven companies, as happened later with social media, is perhaps the most important legacy of *Piazza virtuale*. The management of 3sat appointed a broadcasting manager who ensured that the anonymous audience could not blast any insult, obscenity or radical political message into the ether. In the case of social media, it would take over a decade before these companies began to take some kind of control over their channels. To this day, they fulfil their obligations in this regard only carelessly and haphazardly.

At *Piazza virtuale*, on the other hand, from the very beginning a 3sat staffer made sure that rules of law and common decency were not violated. She was called a "censor" by the group, but actually took on a task that today is called "content moderation".

Those who set up new communication channels also have a responsibility for their development, content and social consequences – that is possibly the most important lesson that can be learned from *Piazza virtuale* today.

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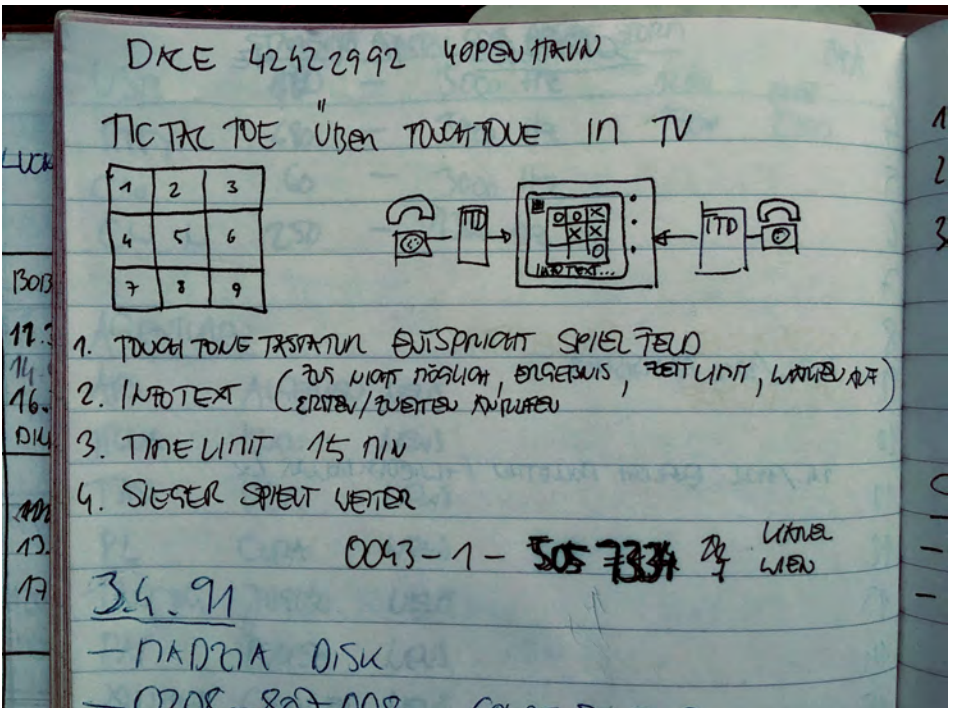

The idea to control television content via touch tone telephone was mentioned for the first time in the sketchbook of Benjamin Heidersberger in April 1991

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Appendix 1 The segments of *Piazza virtuale*

Piazza virtuale consisted of 14 programme segments which were broadcast in a different combination every day. Some of them were on air for the entire duration of *Piazza virtuale*. But there were also some that were removed from the show after the first few weeks, such as *Record Stack* or *tazetta*. *Schule* (School), which was supposed to familiarise the audience with how *Piazza virtuale* worked, was also taken off the air after the first few weeks. *Marketplace*, a kind of TV flea market, had to be removed after a short time because it was considered unauthorised advertising on public television.

Other segments were still being developed in Kassel when *Piazza virtuale* was already on air, and only appeared after the first few weeks of *Piazza virtuale*, such as *Sarah und Daniel* and *Beichtstuhl*. *Moby Dick's Eye*, developed by the artist Hermann-Josef Hack, was only broadcast from the end of August, but then almost daily.

A distinction can be made between those segments in which interaction took place primarily via the telephone keypad with computers in the Van Gogh TV studio in Kassel, for example in the two music applications *Interactive Classical Orchestra* and *Rap 'em Higher*, in which samples could be triggered via telephone keys so that music could be made together, or in *Atelier*, where people could paint together. On *Coffeehouse*, which was the most frequently broadcast, the interaction consisted primarily of the conversations of up to four callers who were on air at the same time. With *Medialandscape* and the robot camera, there were mixed forms of interaction via the telephone keypad and by voice call.

At *Interact with Piazza People*, concerts, parties and performances were broadcast live from Kassel. However, this was rarely included in the show. The Piazzettas, which are the subject of Appendix 2, broadcast from cities all over Europe and from Nagoya in Japan.

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A1.1 *Schule* (School)

(also: Useful Advice, School)

Broadcast dates (selection):

13 June 1992, 11:03–11:20 (3sat), 29 June 1992, 21:07–21:15 (Olympus), 1 July 1992, 11:07–11:15 (3sat)

Description:

On 13 June 1992, *Piazza virtuale* went on the air for the first time with this programme at 11 a.m. *School* was intended to familiarise viewers with the possibilities of interaction with the show, especially the use of the push-button telephone. They were guided by a digitally animated Professor Fox, who had been designed by the Viennese artist Fritz Grosz. With an Austrian accent, he introduced the technology in witty doggerel verses:

Du rufst an
und dann kommt's drauf an,
was dein Telefon alles kann.
Ist es digitale
kommst du direttissima auf die *Piazza virtuale*.
Ist's aber analog,
brauchst a Fernabfroag.
Gibt's überall zu kaufen,
brauchst gar nicht weit zu laufen.
Die hältst Du dann
an die Muschel dran.

(You call
and then it depends on what
your phone can do
If it's digital
you go directly to the *Piazza virtuale*
But if it's analogue,
you need a beeper
buy them everywhere, you don't have to walk far.
Then put it onto the receiver.)

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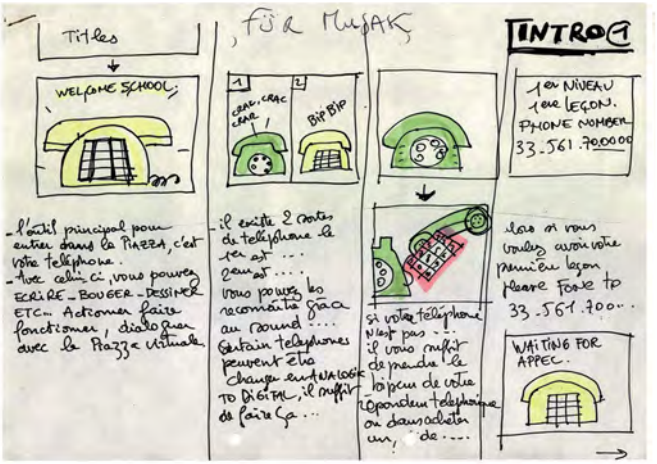

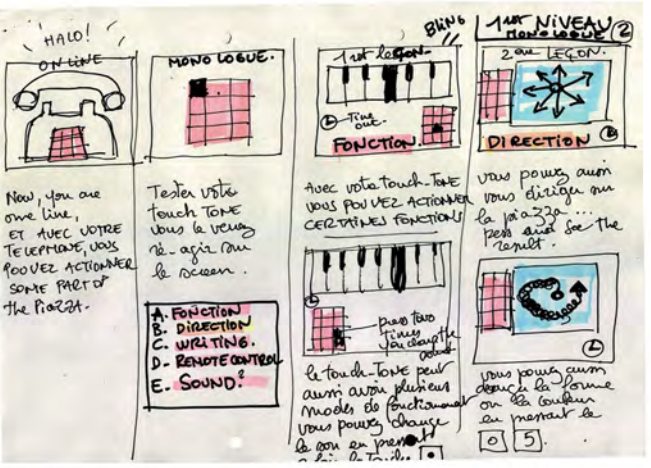

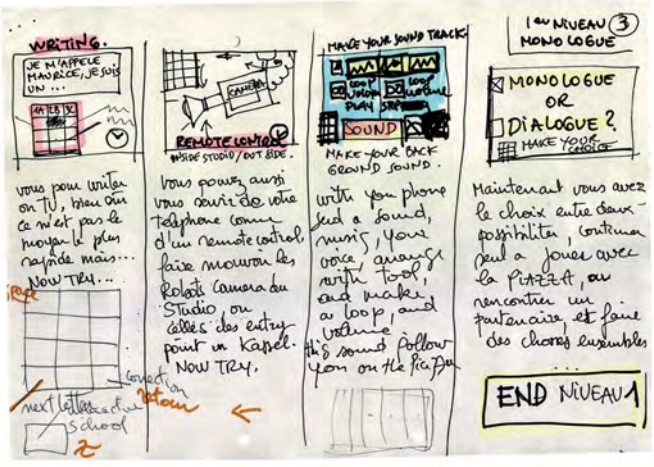

Storyboard for Schule (School) by Gerald Couty (excerpt)

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Then the viewer was shown the various ways of interacting with the programme via the telephone. The interfaces differed greatly from the versions that could actually be seen in the show. The writing function, which appears in earlier versions, never made it into the final show.

("Now or never – your finger is the director.") Time and again the audience was reminded of the interactive nature of the show. At the end of the programme, participants received a diploma as "honoured knights of *Piazza virtuale*".

In the first weeks, *School* was shown almost every day after the opening credits. On 1 July it was shown for the last time on 3sat, on FAB it ran a few days longer. (*tb*)

A1.2 *Coffeehouse*

(also: Women's Coffeehouse, Gay Coffeehouse, International Coffeehouse)

Broadcast dates (selection):

Coffeehouse

18 June 1992, 12:00–12:15, 19 June 1992, 11:45–12:15, (3sat), 5 July 1992, 21:07–21:45 (Olympus), 5 July 1992, 23:07–23:30 (FAB)

Women's Coffeehouse

20 July 1992, 12:00–12:26 (3sat)

Gay Coffeehouse

10 July 1992, 01:27–02:15 (3sat)

International Coffeehouse

3 July 1992, 04:00–04:30 (3sat)

Description:

Coffeehouse was the centrepiece of *Piazza virtuale*. No other format was so frequently on the air. It was shown in most of the broadcast blocks and sometimes took up the bulk of the programming. The length varied from 15 minutes to over an hour. It was only when more and more Piazzettas went on air at the end of July that *Coffeehouse* was no longer broadcast daily on

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3sat. The shows that were aired in the evenings via the *Olympus* satellite often consisted only of *Coffeehouse*.

The segment came closest to the concept of the "self-generating show" that *Piazza virtuale* was based on, as viewers could get involved by calling, faxing or chatting on the mailbox. The idea was to create an informal conversation with chance acquaintances and an occasion for exchange, as in a Viennese coffee house. This is already described in the earliest concept drafts of the show.

In an early storyboard, there are designs for a segment entitled "Hyde Park", an obvious reference to Speakers' Corner (incidentally, an alternative title that appears in some early show descriptions) in the London park of the same name. These sketches suggest that here, in addition to the callers, the audience at the Entry Point cameras should also be involved in political debates. Possible topics mentioned include the "war in Kabul" or a conference in Paris. Information on current political topics was also to be available; originally, elections were also to be possible: "People elect the leader of the day and also the opposition leader by phone", another storyboard says. The possibility of counting votes by phone did not exist anywhere in *Piazza virtuale*. The callers' willingness to engage in political discussions also proved to be much lower than the makers of *Piazza virtuale* had apparently expected. The actual topics of conversation were much more mundane, and often there was no topic at all.

By superimposing the telephone number of *Piazza virtuale*, the audience was invited to call in. Up to four callers were on the air at the same time. In the broadcast blocks that ran on 3sat, the calls were automatically cut off after five minutes. With the Olympus broadcasts, callers could stay on the line as long as they liked and were willing to bear the telephone charges for a long-distance call, which were high in Germany at that time. This often resulted in longer and more substantial conversations, which attracted regular callers. Because the Olympus broadcasts could be received throughout Europe, there were also callers from abroad. The 3sat programme also occasionally had its own format with the title *International Coffeehouse*, but here the callers were usually Germans who were repeatedly encouraged to speak in English.

In the 3sat programmes, the callers changed regularly. Therefore, there were hardly any opportunities for deeper conversations. The speechlessness that occasionally arose in this situation is reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau's famous judgement on the telephone in *Walden*: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it

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may be, have nothing important to communicate." The randomly connected callers often had nothing to say to each other either, asking only for names or places of residence, or clumsily trying to make conversation by asking about the weather or favourite bands.

It was these programmes that earned *Pizza virtuale* the title "Hello TV". Many callers, who had often called dozens of times before getting through, usually answered with "Hello". Some of them were so surprised or scared at being on TV that they hung up immediately. Those who stayed on the line were confronted with other callers with whom they had to find a common topic of conversation in a short time. Sometimes they succeeded, but often they simply greeted "everyone who knows me". Because of the delay between statements and their transmission on television, the conversations were usually jumbled. Often there was also a tense silence, dead air. Occasionally, the members of Van Gogh TV, who were in charge of the broadcast, tried to stimulate conversations. At the beginning of the broadcast, Blixa Bargeld, the singer of the Berlin band Einstürzende Neubauten, was the host in the studio in Kassel for two days.

Often, however, the callers were left to their own devices, unaware of any code of conduct for their behaviour in front of a television audience and unprepared for communicating with others. A precursor of this kind of communication among strangers was the CB radio of the 1970s and 1980s, to which the callers occasionally refer and whose conventions they partly adopt when, for example, they address each other by city names or use radio terminology such as "over". Also similar to *Coffeehouse* were the "telephone party lines" of the 1990s, where one could call a phone number and then be confronted with a similar random selection of potential interlocutors. The chats in mailboxes and online services like CompuServe as well as the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) on the early internet also brought strangers together – just as Facebook or Twitter do today, where acquaintances, hashtags and algorithms put users in touch with like-minded people. Since 2009, Chatroulette has offered the possibility to be randomly connected with strangers on the internet.

At weekends and during holidays, children were often among the callers who sat alone in front of the TV and called the phone number on the screen out of boredom or curiosity. The anonymity of the callers – as in online chats or telephone lines – also often produced behaviours that deliberately tried to torpedo this form of communication. Callers played music, whistled, purposefully triggered deafening feedback by holding the phone receiver up to

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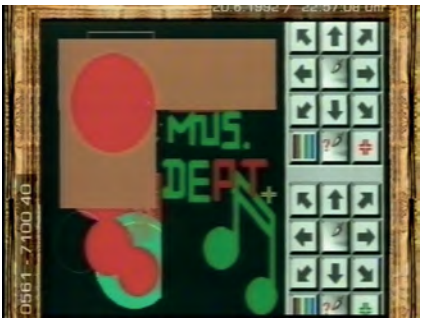

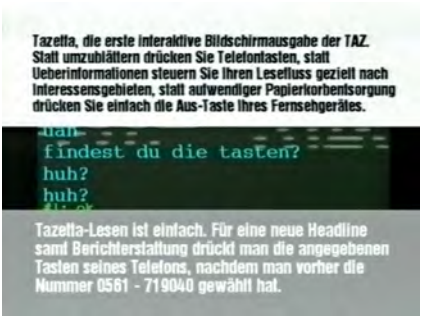

Screenshots of the segments Atelier, Disco Fever, Coffeehouse and tazetta (from top)

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the TV speaker, or disrupted conversations by tapping phone buttons and making other noises. And of course there was burping, swearing and insults. This is where practices emerged that are now known as "trolling": the systematic disruption and denial of "meaningful" communication.

Unlike the social media of today, however, *Piazza virtuale* was strictly moderated from the very beginning. In consultation with 3sat employee Anne-Kathrin Brinkmann, the broadcasting management threw callers off the line who did not comply with a – never precisely defined – code of behaviour. These exclusions were made recognisable to the television audience by displaying a digitally animated "Censored" stamp. "We are obliged by law to censor various things", says Karel Dudesek in a feature about *Piazza virtuale* produced for the private broadcaster Premiere (today Sky), "and we are happy to do so. Because through censorship we also generate energy and creativity … Viewers are also concerned with why we censor: … advertising, pornography, extreme political directions." In practice, however, the criteria by which callers were thrown off lines were not always so clear. In this context, debates about freedom of expression, power of definition and censorship arose at *Piazza virtuale* that continue to this day.

Apart from the calls, there were two other ways for the audience to get involved in the *Coffeehouse* programme. The lower third of the screen showed a chat taking place in a computer mailbox – probably the first time in the history of international television that an online chat was shown on television. A window on the top left of the screen showed faxes that had been received, although they were not always legible due to their relatively small size on the screen. Between these three levels, intertextual communication processes occasionally occurred.

Early on, versions of the format for women and homosexuals were scheduled alongside the regular *Coffeehouse*. Only *Women's Coffeehouse* made it onto the show more often, *Gay Coffeehouse* was aired only once. Much of *Woman's Coffeehouse* consisted of attempts to maintain the promise of the title. Even though male callers were immediately faded out, a good part of the communication consisted in the female callers defending "their" show against the men who called in. Male callers pretended to be women, were discovered, their calls were cut off; the female callers were often left only with the role of guardians of the communication space granted to them.

With *Gay Coffeehouse* there was also the problem that the callers could not be reliably identified. The callers were repeatedly told by the station

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management that the show was only for gays and lesbians, which was usually met with mockery, horror or homophobic comments. Even during the conversations among the callers, the topic comes up again and again briefly, but mostly with remarks in the style of "Are you all back-loaders here?" The few statements that positively portray homosexuality or invite sexual acts seem to be the result of a desire to provoke. However, individual callers also complain that the desired exchange about homosexuality did not take place. Furthermore, it was almost exclusively men who called in; women hardly ever took part in the *Gay Coffeehouse* programme. (*tb/jw*)

A1.3 *Interactive Classic Orchestra/Rap 'em high*

(also: The Classical Orchestra, Interactive Orchestra/ Disco Fever, Rap 'em higher)

Broadcast dates (selection):

Interactive Classic Orchestra

13 June 1992, 12:15–12:30, 14 June 1992, 04:15–04:45, 14 June 1992, 12:15–12:30, 15 June 1992, 11:50–12:00 (3sat)

Rap 'em High (Disco Fever)

13 June 1992, 11:30–11:45, 14 June 1992, 02:30–03:00, 14 June 1992, 11:30–11:45, 15 June 1992, 12:10–12:30 (3sat)

Description:

"Make music with your telephone!" This maxim was displayed at the beginning of *Interactive Classic Orchestra* and *Rap 'em High* (or *Disco Fever*). In multifrequency dialling, the keystroke signals of a telephone are converted into audio frequencies that can be further processed by computers in order to make music.

The first project sketches of Van Gogh TV already envisaged the production of interactive music programmes where the audience would be able to control synthesisers. Technically, the concept seems simple in retrospect, although the implementation proved to be quite complex at the time and required some self-built hardware: the touch-tone signals of the individual callers' dial buttons were processed in a first computer, which transmitted them to an Atari, a com-

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puter popular for music production at the time. The Atari in turn processed the signals further. While the Roland drum computer could then be controlled directly via a SCSI connection, commands for the samplers, which also came from Roland, were sent to a second Atari via the music software Cubase.

Interactive Classic Orchestra was on air from the first day of broadcasting and used the instruments of classical music. To the sound of a harpsichord, the opening credits first present the title of the programme, with a red curtain in the background. At the bottom of the screen, four smaller repetitive video clips appear, showing the spinning moon, passing clouds and surf in short continuous loops. Afterwards, a graphic entitled "Soundcheck", showing four telephone keyboards, illustrates which line controls which instrument or feature. In addition, callers who have been put through can practise here and try out the virtual instrument assigned to them, as in a real sound check.

After about 30–45 seconds, the actual show begins: The background shows live footage, mostly shots of Friedrichsplatz or the entrance area of the Fridericianum in Kassel, reminiscent of surveillance cameras. At the bottom of the picture, the number to be dialled for possible participation is shown throughout. On the left-hand side of the screen are the video loops familiar from the soundcheck, but this time arranged one below the other.

The audience "plays" on instruments via three of the available four lines. Violin, trumpet and a piano are used. In addition, a fourth line activates one line from one of four different poems, which then appear one below the other in the middle of the television screen next to the loops described. In this way, alongside the music, new poetry is constantly generated by and for the audience. The verses come from German and occasionally French originals, which regularly alternate with each other. In individual programmes, however, instead of lines of text, catchwords are occasionally inserted.

In addition to the instruments, one line is reserved solely for the singing skills of a caller. Callers who do not sing but merely speak are usually immediately admonished by the Van Gogh TV staff and reminded of the concept of the programme or immediately kicked out. The usual censorship notice that appears on the screen in the form of a red warning sign has its own design here, showing a clef instead of the inscription "Censored". After blocks of three to five minutes in length, the "Soundcheck" screen appears again and new callers can dial in to engage in musical activity. One broadcast contained between three and ten individual blocks.

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The second programme dedicated to interactive music-making was also part *Piazza virtuale* from the very beginning. Initially started under the title *Disco Fever*, it was dedicated to rap. After just one week of broadcasting and only seven editions, it was renamed *Rap 'em High* on 20 June 1992. Van Gogh TV aimed to motivate the audience to create their own raps on the phone instead of just using the instruments.

In the opening credits, animated human figures dance in front of backgrounds of neon, psychedelic colour patterns to electronic music. Friends of the Van Gogh TV group were filmed for this sequence, including video artist Rotraut Pape. Subtitles in English explain to viewers who still have dial phones that they need to call a separate number and use a touch-tone beeper to participate.

The instruments here consist of snare, bass, keyboard and a sound effect imitating the "scratching" popular in rap music, i.e. the rhythmic movement of a record under the needle of the record player. To support the audience, an additional beat is played. The broadcast image shows the four available instruments as small, animated 3D graphics in the lower part of the screen: drums, keyboard, bass and scratching. The display status "offline" or "online" underneath indicates which lines are currently busy or which instruments are being operated.

In the centre of the image are camera shots from the Kassel studio, which are often manipulated with effects such as distortions and picture-in-picture. Similar to the verses activated by callers in *Classical Orchestra*, in *Rap 'em High* the animated dancers shown in the opening credits react to the keyboard signals of the audience's phones and move across the screens to the music.

Callers sometimes countered the ban on spoken language with the tactic of simply singing questions about the names or origins of the interlocutors instead of talking to each other. In the 27 June show, for example, a sung dialogue develops between the callers Gabi and Gerd, in the course of which they ask each other about their hometowns and general state of health. Before that, Gabi had already greeted her mother and all her friends, also in a sing-song voice. Such "breaches of the rules" were not punished. Instead of performing their own lyrics, the singers often make do with simple "la" sounds or singing children's songs. For instance, Gabi presents her interpretation of "Brother Jacob". In the *Interactive Classic Orchestra*, the poem fragments or catchwords that are inserted are sometimes repeated as a song.

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Overall, there is hardly any harmonious music-making by the participants. Rather, callers move seemingly randomly across the keypad of their phones, the resulting cacophonies characterising the proceedings. Due to the lack of contact, there was little possibility to agree to make music together. Thus, the callers hardly responded to the sounds of the others and played their respective instruments rather "wildly" and incoherently. Furthermore, especially in the early days of the *Piazza virtuale* there were occasional failures of individual synthesisers, so that instead of the intended instrument, only the normal beeping of the telephone keys could be heard. (*jw*)

A1.4 *Virtuelles Atelier* (Virtual Studio)

(also: Das Virtuelle Atelier/Atelier)

Broadcast dates (selection):

17 June 1992, 22:45–23:30 (Olympus), 18 June 1992, 11:30–12:00, 19 June 1992, 11:15–11:45 (3sat)

Description:

Analogous to the interactive music programmes within *Piazza virtuale*, the show also featured a format dedicated to the visual arts. In the *Virtual Studio*, the keystroke signals of the audience's home telephones were used to create paintings on the television screens with various painting tools. Due to the layout and hardware, the number of participants was limited to two callers.

Surrounded by a picture frame, text panels at the beginning of the programme explain in detail the concept and use of the "virtual studio". They explicitly refer to the "Beuysian idea", which is "even surpassed" here. This refers to Joseph Beuys' famous postulate that every human being is an artist – but with *Virtuelles Atelier* every caller becomes a "documenta artist": "Millionen Künstler zur documenta IX" (Millions of artists at documenta IX) it says in the opening credits.

Further text panels explain the controls of the "interactive artists' meeting place": the star key is used to select the colour, the 0 to select the desired tool. The early concept drafts show that originally 286 colours were assumed in the software's palette instead of the 32 that were ultimately available. In addition to a round or angular brush of varying thickness, various alternatives are available: rectangle and circle (filled or empty), lines as well as a spray

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or airbrush functions. Overall, the user interface, operation and selection options are reminiscent of graphics software of that time, especially Microsoft's *Paint* (formerly *Paintbrush*). Of course, at the beginning of the 1990s many of the viewers had probably never used a computer, let alone one with a drawing program.

Within the golden frame remaining on the screen is the interface. The "canvas" for painting and drawing is placed on the left of the screen and takes up two-thirds of it. On the right-hand side, arranged one below the other, are the two consoles, each of which serves as a control for one of the callers. Pressing a button changes the menu that is accessed: colour selection, control of the direction as well as the selection of the painting utensils. The use of the console and its tools is accompanied by individual sounds, such as a spraying noise for the airbrush function. Short trumpet jingles are also played irregularly as a sound effect.

The programme had its premiere on 17 June as part of a broadcast via the Olympus satellite, and was shown for the first time on 3sat on the following day. Afterwards it remained a regular part of the programme until the last day of broadcasting. In the first weeks, it was not technically possible for the participants to talk while they were drawing. This option was not added until August 1992. 3sat representative Kathrin Brinkman noted in a memo that there should not be another conversation format à la *Coffeehouse*. She suggested that callers to the *Atelier* should be asked to talk exclusively about the drawings being created. In the end, however, there was no such strict intervention by the moderator. In retrospect, it is even noticeable that the participants talked very little with each other and instead concentrated more on the application of the programme.

In contrast to the interactive music formats, where the participants ended up creating mostly noise, *Atelier* lead to more meaningful results. Admittedly, there were also participants who mostly tried things out and randomly explored possible functions. However, there was also active, joint production of artworks. For example, in the show on 17 September 1992, coloured shapes were used to draw the Japanese and German national flags. Often, participants drew letters and words to convey short messages or to have fun. In the very first issue, for example, the term "Depp" (moron) was emblazoned on the screen after painstaking drawing work.

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A1.5 Medialandscape

Broadcast dates (selection):

17 June 1992 11:30–12:00, 22 June 1992 12:00–12:15, 13 July 1992 12:15–12:26, 11 August 1992 12:15–12:24, 8 September 1992 11:50–12:10 (all on 3sat)

Description:

Medialandscape was probably the most enigmatic of all the *Piazza virtuale* shows. Nevertheless, it was aired almost daily. The show was based on the idea of triggering short sound and image sequences with keywords from the online chat. The screen design showed a brown frame surrounding a rectangular field on which green letters move through the picture on a dark background, apparently showing fragments from articles from the newspaper *die tageszeitung* (see the description of *tazetta* for background on the cooperation between Van Gogh TV and the paper). At the bottom of the picture is the computer chat, familiar from other *Piazza virtuale* programmes. A computer in Kassel reacts to key words from the chat. If one of the chatters writes "Hello", for example, this word appears on a narrow vertical bar below the window with the chat and triggers short sound samples or video clips. These change over the course of *Piazza virtuale*.

For example, in the 8 September 1992 show "Hello" leads to the playing of a digital animation in which one face morphs into another while being partially obscured by the word "Hello". In a broadcast on 11 September the same cue results in a short sound clip: "Hello, and welcome to the show!" Many of the acoustic samples seem to come from feature films. The videos show simple digital animations and black-and-white footage shot around the Fridericianum in Kassel, with still images appearing now and then. Sometimes the reference to the keyword is clear, for example when the word "Leute" (people) shows the queue at the entrance to the documenta. Other references are less easy to decode.

During the show, people can continue to call in. The participants on the chat often seem intent on disrupting the conversations with annoying samples. In particular, a short yodel triggered by the keyword "jodel" (to yodel) is sometimes repeated over and over. Thus, a certain interaction between callers and chatters takes place, albeit primarily through a kind of provocation that would be called "trolling" today. It is striking that the cue words in this

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segment provide the callers with a topic of conversation: people often exchange speculation about keywords that trigger samples.

Salvatore Vanasco, who developed this segment together with programmer Wolfgang Werner, says in our interview about *Medialandscape*: "It was the first project where software played a bigger role. Before, software was only used to control machines or for synchronisation. Here software suddenly became a creative tool." (*tb*)

A1.6 *Interactive Marketplace*

(also: Market, Markt, Marktplatz)

Broadcast dates (selection):

13 June 1992, 11:45–12:15, 15 June 1992, 03:15–04:15, 17 June 1992, 12:00–12:15, 2 July 1992, 22:15–22:45 (Olympus)

Description:

CD Video Room to Rent
Used Washing Machines Television Sets
Boyfriends Girlfriends Bycicles [sic!]
You can find it all on this interactive Market Place.

This is how the viewers of the *Interactive Marketplace* broadcast at *Piazza virtuale* were greeted in the credits. The show begins with a short computer animation of a drive along a road from the driver's perspective, which, according to a passing signpost, leads to the *Piazza virtuale* and continues through two gates to a rudimentary 3D animation of an urban square. The clip is reminiscent of the various versions of the opening credits of the 1980s German music video show *Formel Eins*, and the music also has a certain proximity to the music that accompanied these opening credits, namely Jaap Eggermont's *Formula One Theme*, Harold Faltermeyer's *Formula One* and *The Race* by Yello, all three sample-based, electronic instrumental pieces. Some other elements of the track are also reminiscent of hits from that time, for example Izhar Ashdot's remix of Ofra Haza's *Im Nin'alu* or *Jump Around* by House of Pain.

The opening credits then show short, repetitive video clips reminiscent of GIF animations, while it is explained in writing and in English that this is a programme where the audience can buy and sell; the various methods of par-

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ticipating by telephone, fax, chat or videophone are explained. The address of the broadcasting containers and a map of downtown Kassel are also shown.

The segment disappeared after a short time from the *Piazza virtuale* on 3sat because it violated the public broadcaster's advertising guidelines. On 3sat, it was only shown six times, but on the first days of broadcasting it was shown in every programme, which indicates the important role that it was intended to have in *Piazza virtuale*. The fact that Van Gogh TV even included a show that so blatantly violated the rules for public television shows both the great freedom the group enjoyed during the planning of *Piazza virtuale* and their poor understanding of public television in Germany.

After 17 June 1992, the *Interactive Marketplace* was no longer broadcast on 3sat, but only on the Olympus satellite, for which the rules of public television did not apply. Since the audience there was much smaller than for the television broadcasts, however, there were fewer viewers for the show and it disappeared from the schedule altogether. It was broadcast for the last time on Olympus on 5 July 1992; it was shown on the local Berlin station FAB until 11 August 1992. On 3sat, most of the broadcasts were 30 minutes long; on the other channels the length was between 15 and 45 minutes.

However, the few broadcasts on 3sat show its potential. From the beginning there are callers who really try to sell. Among other things, video cameras and fax modems, cars and musical instruments, radios and skates, model aeroplanes and other toys are offered. There are also callers who are asking for something. Technical equipment, especially computers and computer components are offered particularly often, which also says something about the audience that was attracted to the show. Services and events are also advertised: On 14 June, a Natascha from Ratingen advertises a music festival in Düsseldorf. Some users who use the programme for a kind of TV personal ad introduce themselves with details about their appearance. From today's point of view, the willingness with which the callers reveal their private telephone numbers on TV is astonishing.

The structure of the screen is comparable to that of other *Piazza virtuale* programmes such as *Coffeehouse*. The TV monitor shows incoming faxes in a rectangular, horizontal window at the top left, the image of a live camera with pictures of the surroundings of the broadcasting containers or of the access point on the right and the online chat below, which takes up almost the entire lower half of the screen. The latter is hardly used for sales offers, whereas in the few broadcasts of *Interactive Marketplace* on 3sat, a good num-

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ber of faxes with sales offers came in. Some of the sellers using this method seem to be at least semi-professional traders who, among other things, offer CDs and software on their own fax paper with logo and company name.

Four square icons, representing the four callers who are on air, use a colour gradient to show how much time is left for the callers. The blocks slowly change colour from red to green during the 100 seconds available to each caller, an unusual colour choice given the traditional meaning of these colours (red = stop, green = start). Like the screen design of virtually all programmes, the design of *Interactive Marketplace* is more reminiscent of a computer desktop than a conventional live television broadcast because of the various windows. Looped animations of cars, watches, fruit, money or slogans such as "Buy!" or "Vendre" keep moving across the screen.

The show takes up the model of the classified newspaper ad, but also antedates future e-commerce offers such as eBay or craigslist, which developed in the early days of the World Wide Web. At the same time, the programme also demonstrates the limitation of not being able to store and retrieve information in the television format that became possible on the web. If you don't write down a phone number quickly enough, you can't make contact; sales often fail because providers and interests can't communicate beyond the broadcast. Often callers try to reach sellers who have already hung up or whose calling time is over. However, some of the callers actually arrange for further private sales negotiations by phone.

Other callers are not interested in trading on the TV marketplace and simply want to talk. In the resulting babble of voices, the sales offers are often lost, and at some points a "market manager" from the control room intervenes to urge the callers to sell. However, the fact that this segment, unlike *Coffeehouse*, has a set theme seems to enliven the conversations during the show.

There are also examples of pranks and trolls in this early phase of *Piazza virtuale*. For example, one participant introduces himself as "Piotr from Katowice" and offers bicycles in a pseudo-Polish accent – apparently a reference to the theft of bicycles after the opening of the Eastern Bloc. In another episode, one of the participants in the chat presents his soul for sale; he is bid, among other things, a packet of cigarettes or a number of free wishes in return. A mother-in-law and ten pairs of used underpants are also offered.

Immediately, the channel is also used to make dubious offers. For example, one fax advertises "multi-level marketing" with a fax number and the handwritten slogan "Money like never before! Ask me how" ("multi-level marketing"

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is also popularly known as the "snowball system" and is now advertised by shady characters on YouTube and other social media). Here it becomes clear why 3sat did not want a sales show, although such shows can be entertaining even for those who do not participate in the trade (think of the success of shows like *Bares für Rares* in Germany or *Storage Wars* and *Pawn Stars* in the USA).

A sales show is in all the early concepts for *Piazza virtuale*. Already in a short report of a meeting between Karel Dudesek and Rolf Lobeck on 8 July 1991, the title "Shopping Centre" is found on a list of show ideas under "Karel's Suggestions"; and in an early programme draft from 16 August 1991, there is another list of ideas which includes a "Bazaar". As can be seen from various notes, a programme called *Markt* or *Market* was among the first to have its interface designed, along with the music shows and even before the drawing programme *Atelier* and *Medialandscape*. As soon as the programme goes on air, details such as window size or the opening credits are further refined. (*tb*)

A1.7 Record Stack

Broadcast dates (selection):

15 June 1992, 11:30–11:35; 12:00–12:10 (3sat),
17 June 1992, 21:30–21:45 (Olympus)

Description:

The credits inform the audience at the beginning of *Record Stack*: "The breaks on *Piazza virtuale* are also interactive. Please leave your ideas or suggestions on our electronic answering machine. Our team will try to realise your ideas during documenta IX in Kassel." This was one of the more experimental segments of *Piazza virtuale* and was broadcast seven times on 3sat and Olympus in the very early days. It no longer appears after the broadcast of 26 June, and was thus only included for less than two weeks.

Record Stack is a "remediation". This term, coined by Jay David Bolter and David Gruisin, means that a newer medium emulates an older medium – in this case an answering machine that is imitated in a television show. With the touch-tone phone, one could activate a recording function to record a 15-second voice message, like today's "voice messages" in apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram. It was also possible to retrieve previously recorded messages.

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The design of the screen is simple. A strong yellow dominates the left side of the screen, which – together with a hand with telephone receiver shown as a grid model – looks like the cover of Kraftwerk's album *Computerwelt*. Three smaller, rectangular fields on the right side are in pastel shades and contain instructions for the use of the application. Compared to other format, the interface is emphatically didactic. The only animations that exist appear on the keyboard on the screen when someone dials a number; if a message is recorded, the reels of a stylised cassette rotate. A black bar appears in the middle of the screen to indicate the time remaining when recording a message.

Compared to the design of other interfaces, *Record Stack* appears unfinished and "undesigned". While most other screen designs suggest a certain spatial depth through shadow effects, surface patterns or the various screen windows, this interface appears completely flat. Since scroll bars and the menu bar of a Macintosh computer appear repeatedly at the top of the screen, one suspects that one is seeing the graphic interface of an application on the computer on which it was programmed – not the interfaces designed with the software Screenmachine, as in the other programmes, where attempts were made to give the disparate elements a coherent look. The musical accompaniment consists of a sequence of synthesiser chords in the style of electronic ambient music popularised in the early 1990s by artists such as Aphex Twin and The Orb. Actions on the keyboard are accompanied by short sound effects.

Obviously, *Record Stack* was intended as a forum for the audience, where the viewers were given opportunities to share their ideas about the further development of *Piazza virtuale*. Unlike the conversations between callers in *Coffeehouse*, here was a possibility of direct interaction with the makers of *Piazza virtuale*. Since people could record their suggestions, they also had a different significance than the fleeting conversations in the other programmes.

This platform, which is reminiscent of the discussion forums and web boards on the internet or apps like Clubhouse, was, however, hardly used for this purpose by viewers. During broadcasts via the Olympus satellite, callers occasionally report the reception quality, many of them from abroad. In part, the callers also respond directly to the contributions of others – as is the case with today's social media. Some viewers formulate praise or criticism for *Pizza virtuale*. But there were few concrete, implementable suggestions for the development of the show.

As in the other formats, some of the callers greet viewers or acquaintances or give their phone number to be called at home. Others complain about

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high telephone costs. Of course, the jokers who simply shout "Blah Blah Blah" into their phones, make noises or play radio music are not to be missed. But many callers also seem to be simply trying out the technical possibilities of the format and listening to other people's messages.

In the short time that *Record Stack* was on air, it was not able to establish itself as a forum for viewers or even create real interaction with the audience. In any case, it would hardly have been possible to make substantial suggestions in the 15 seconds available. Therefore, the programme did not function as a real feedback channel; comparable possibilities were only opened up later on the internet. (*tb*)

A1.8 *Sarah und Daniel* (Sarah and Daniel) (in early concepts: Romeo and Juliet)

Broadcast dates (selection):

11 July 1992 21:07–21:30 (Olympus), 20 July 1992 23:04–23:15 (FAB), 24 July 1992 11:30–11:45 (3sat)

Description:

Sarah und Daniel was a programme where viewers could have two characters interact with each other by phone. From a technical perspective, these were very short video clips that could be triggered by the different phone keys. The phone's star key could be used to switch between different "moods" of the two characters, and then trigger different utterances with the number keys. The statements of the two figures, lasting only seconds, belong to four thematic areas: "love", "everyday life", "quarrel" and "reconciliation". The mode in which they speak can also be read under the pictures of the two protagonists. The callers who operated this programme could not speak at the same time, but two other callers could and were expected to comment on the behaviour of the two characters. In the opening credits they are called upon to provide "partner advice" or "exchange of experiences, comfort, criticism and what have you".

The callers act like a kind of digital puppet master. The form of control is reminiscent of the interactive CD-ROMs that experienced a brief boom in the early 1990s. Established artists such as Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel or The Residents developed interactive applications for the ultimately short-

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lived medium. Especially the American firm Voyager Company (which later became the DVD label Criterion Collection) commissioned elaborate productions. As multimedia versions of interactive fiction and hypertext literature, they often contained dialogues triggered by external signals similar to *Sarah und Daniel*.

The two characters were played by two Van Gogh TV staffers: Sarah Khan, who was responsible for administration and sponsorship, and Daniel Haude, who worked on hardware development. Sarah Khan's part was shot in the Karlsaue park in Kassel, while David Haude was filmed in an interior room. Both can be seen in black-and-white rectangular windows in the upper part of the screen against a colourful background that takes up half of the screen.

Depending on the content of the conversation, these backgrounds also change. When the topic is love, the background is red and shows a pair of highly stylised, crossed hands with wedding rings under Sarah's picture. When it comes to the theme of reconciliation, Daniel's background is yellow and decorated with a photo of a rose. When it comes to everyday life, under Sarah's image there is an isometric computer sketch of an iron against a green background, and under Daniel's a screw.

Not only do the images perpetuate gender stereotypes, but so do the utterances of the characters, which are of little depth, not only because of their – probably technically conditioned – brevity: "You're so great!", Sarah sighs and blows kisses. Daniel responds with, "I think you're really cute". In an argument, Daniel goes on the attack ("I'm tired of hearing that", "That's so typical!", "I cannot believe that"), while Sarah can only weakly threaten: "There are others".

The callers hardly made use of the opportunity to talk to the digital avatars or give them relationship advice. If anything, most of the direct reactions to what the characters say are sarcastic or ironic. At the same time, there are often more personal conversations between the callers in *Sarah und Daniel* than in other shows. Since there are only two callers on the line at any time, there seems to be social pressure to engage in meaningful conversation. Possibly stimulated by the topic of the show, there is occasionally downright flirting.

The segment was broadcast for the first time on 11 July 1992 via the Olympus satellite. The next broadcasts were also on Olympus or on the local Berlin station FAB. Possibly it was initially to be tested technically and in terms of audience reaction in front of smaller audiences, as these two channels rea-

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ched fewer viewers. It was not until 24 July that *Sarah und Daniel* was broadcast for the first time in the morning show on 3sat, where it was seen by considerably more viewers. In the following week it was shown regularly on 3sat, then only a few more times on FAB before it disappears from the programme completely, only appearing a few more times at the end of August in the long night shows on 3sat at the weekend. As a rule, *Sarah und Daniel* was on for 15 to 20 minutes. In total, the show ran a good 40 times.

The version that was initially shown was not accompanied by music. It is only after a few broadcasts that a musical accompaniment – a repeating, string-like synthesiser pattern – is added. After that, nothing changes in the design of the programme.

Performer Sarah Khan is now a writer and has published several books, including *Eine romantische Maßnahme* (2004), *Die Gespenster von Berlin: Unheimliche Geschichten* (2009) and *Wochenendhaus* (2019); Daniel Haude has made a number of stop-motion films, including *Rattenskat* (1999) and *Quench* (2002). (*tb*)

A1.9 *Beichtstuhl* (Confessional)

(also: The Beichtstuhl)

Broadcast dates (selection):

30 August 1992, 05:45–05:55; 28 August 1992, 12:20–12:26; 1 September 1992, 12:15–12:26 (3sat)

Description:

Beichtstuhl was broadcast for the first time six weeks after the beginning of *Piazza virtuale*, although the idea appears in the very first proposals. The design of the show – especially the opening credits – change a couple of times while it is already on air. *Beichtstuhl* is broadcast for the first time on 31 July on FAB, where it is subsequently shown daily. It does not appear on 3sat until 5 August and is used infrequently and irregularly thereafter, usually for a broadcast time of between five and ten minutes. In total, *Beichtstuhl* is broadcast only ten times on 3sat in the morning and on the night-time shows at the weekend.

In the opening credits, which – acoustically accompanied by organ music and a Latin Our Father – show a stylised confessional, it is explained that callers now have the opportunity to confess their sins. Then the whole screen

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goes black and a priest (voiced by Mike Hentz) asks for a confession while a telephone number is faded in. Initially, callers are repeatedly prompted with voice samples such as "Ich weiß, was Du meinst" (I know what you mean), "Und wie soll es weitergehen?" (And how do you want to go on?) or "Ist Dir das schon mal klar geworden, wozu du hier auf Erden bist?" (Have you ever realised what you're here on earth for?); in later programmes these interjections no longer exist. If a caller has confessed, they either receive absolution or are told "Absolution nicht erteilt!" (Absolution not given!). With these words, callers who do not want to confess but, for example, send greetings are also thrown off the line.

Unlike in the other segments, only one caller gets through, who then has the audience's entire attention. A good number of the callers actually do make some sort of confession. Most of them are rather harmless or humorous. Among other things, people "confess" to still sitting at breakfast at 11 o'clock, to not separating their trash or to calling from someone else's phone line. Other callers confess to alleged crimes such as the murder of a family member.

The anonymity of the internet has contributed to a polarising tone in online confessions today, often combined with agitation and threats. The potential already exists in this segment, but is rarely exploited. However, in the weekend night shows, where *Confessional* is not shown until four or five in the morning, there are also more serious or disturbing confessions; for example, a caller confesses that he approves of the right-wing extremist attacks on a hostel in Rostock housing Vietnamese contract workers. It remains unclear whether this is a genuine expression of political opinion or a deliberate provocation; it is now known on the internet as "trolling". (*tb*)

A1.10 tazetta

Broadcast dates (selection):

21 July 1992, 21:07–21:30 (Olympus), 27 July 1992, 11:45–12:00 (3sat)

Description:

A programme that looked somewhat unspectacular on television was, from today's perspective, one of the most forward-looking ideas at *Piazza virtuale*: at *tazetta* viewers could browse through the digitally retrievable newspaper

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tageszeitung (*taz*). At that time there had already been a news service on the BTX online service of the Deutsche Bundespost for almost ten years and since 1990 also Teletext as part of the television service, where you could call up the latest news with the remote control. But with *tazetta* you could look at the content of the *taz* newspaper of the coming day in the early evening of the previous day. The segment ran only briefly in the second half of June 1992: once in the morning programme on 3sat, five times on Olympus and three times on FAB.

The few broadcasts show that the viewers who called obviously had difficulties in intuitively understanding the navigation via the telephone keys. However, the method used to move through the content on offer was already similar to surfing the web: basically, one moves from one link to the next, like an internet user clicking through a hypertext on the web. A resourceful user quickly begins to "scroll" through what's on offer, just like on a smartphone, and even finds the humorous *Gurke des Tages* ("Nonsense of the Day") column that still exists in *taz* today. Fragments from *taz* articles were also used as visual background material in *Medialandscape*.

The *taz* newspaper announced the new offering in a short article on the day of the documenta's opening: "As the first newspaper in Germany, our EDP has set up an electronic archive from which Van Gogh collects the next day's newspaper every night. So our subscribers can leave their newspaper at home when they make a pilgrimage to Kassel to see the art; they can read the daily newspaper on the *Piazza Virtuale*."

Manfred Riepe, *taz*'s TV critic at the time, warned in a piece that appeared later: "The media artists are providing (in)voluntary development aid for a media culture in which (inter)activity is an even more sublime form of passivity and powerlessness than mere gawking has been up to now." But that did not stop *taz* from continuing its involvement with new technology. On 12 May 1995, barely three years after *Piazza virtuale*, it announced its website: "The *taz* is the first national daily newspaper that can be read on the worldwide computer network internet." (*tb*)

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A1.11 *Robocam*

(also: "Muskart Robotkamera", "Muskart the Robocam")

Broadcast dates (selection):

25 July 1992, 11:20–11:45 (3sat),
27 July 1992, 23:04–23.20 (FAB)

Description:

One of the most innovative and apparently also most popular segments of *Piazza virtuale* was the robot camera: a remote-controlled camera that callers could steer with their phones along a track suspended from the ceiling of the container studio in Kassel. Here, the concept of telepresence, which was discussed theoretically at the time, was translated into a concrete application. *Robocam* was introduced with "Werde dein eigener Regisseur" (Become your own director), which is reminiscent of YouTube's "Broadcast Yourself" slogan.

There is no indication that the inventors of this segment were aware of the historical references, such as the German television show *Der Goldene Schuss* (The Golden Shot, 1964–1970) with Lou van Burg. The question of whether TV shows of the 1990s that worked with robot cameras after *Piazza virtuale*, such as *Super!* on Sat1, were directly influenced by *Robocam* could also not be clarified.

The robot camera had been built by Hamburg artist Nicolas Anatol Baginsky, who had made a name for himself in Hamburg with his robot sculptures since the mid-1980s. His work in this field began when he equipped the Hamburg discotheque Fun Club and was asked to stage an "industrial performance" for it. Baginsky built a machine based on the principle of the double pendulum. From this approach, he developed increasingly technically complex robot sculptures, including a host robot for the TV show *Canale Grande* with Dieter Moor and a robot band that made its own music with the help of artificial intelligence. He also developed his own mechanical and electronic instruments, which were used for performances and in plays. He not only built the devices himself, but also programmed them. He came into contact with Van Gogh TV through Salvatore Vanasco.

The robot camera was a surveillance camera that could be swivelled horizontally and vertically and was mounted on a rail under the ceiling. Its movements could be directed using the acoustic signals of the telephone keypad, as in other applications of *Piazza virtuale*. The signals were sent to the camera

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via infrared data transmission. The power supply came from the rail to which the camera was attached, so that it could move independently of cables. In addition, Baginsky had mounted a kind of "feeler" made of percussion clappers on the front and back of the device, which reacted to resistance and stopped the camera moving. This was to prevent the camera, which sometimes floated through the studio at head height, from injuring a staff member.

Technically, the concept was apparently difficult to realise. The robot camera was announced in the *Piazza virtuale* broadcasting schedules for 2, 3 and 13 July, but is only to be seen for the first time on 25 July, more than a month after the beginning of *Piazza virtuale*. The premiere (which took place in the early hours of the morning) was still marked by numerous technical problems, some of which would not be resolved by the end of *Piazza virtuale* – there are regular image disturbances at certain points in the camera's movement. At the beginning, the graphic navigation elements that are supposed to demonstrate to the audience how to steer the camera are still missing. Because you get a direct view of the studio via the robot camera, you can also observe the hectic hustle and bustle that occurs during its first use. Even after a month, broadcasts with the robot camera are occasionally interrupted because of technical problems.

From the end of July, the robot camera is on air almost daily, and it is also used regularly in the broadcasts on FAB. While in the beginning the robot camera is seen for 15 minutes or more, later it is used for shorter periods, often only five minutes at the end of a show. In the last few weeks it appears less often in the show, probably because more Piazzettas now have to be accommodated.

Robocam delivered images from the inner workings of the studio, allowing the audience a glimpse "behind the scenes" of *Piazza virtuale*. This anticipates how news programmes today occasionally show the editorial team in open-plan offices in the background. It included not only shots of the studio set-up, but also personal conversations with the makers of Van Gogh TV, who explained to the callers how to operate the camera. Often, however, there were conversations that went beyond the set-up of the studio and the broadcasting technology. In some programmes, the callers were asked for their opinion on *Piazza virtuale* and even for concrete suggestions for improvement.

Robotcam installed in Ponton´s media lab in Hamburg after documenta
Photo: altschaffel.com

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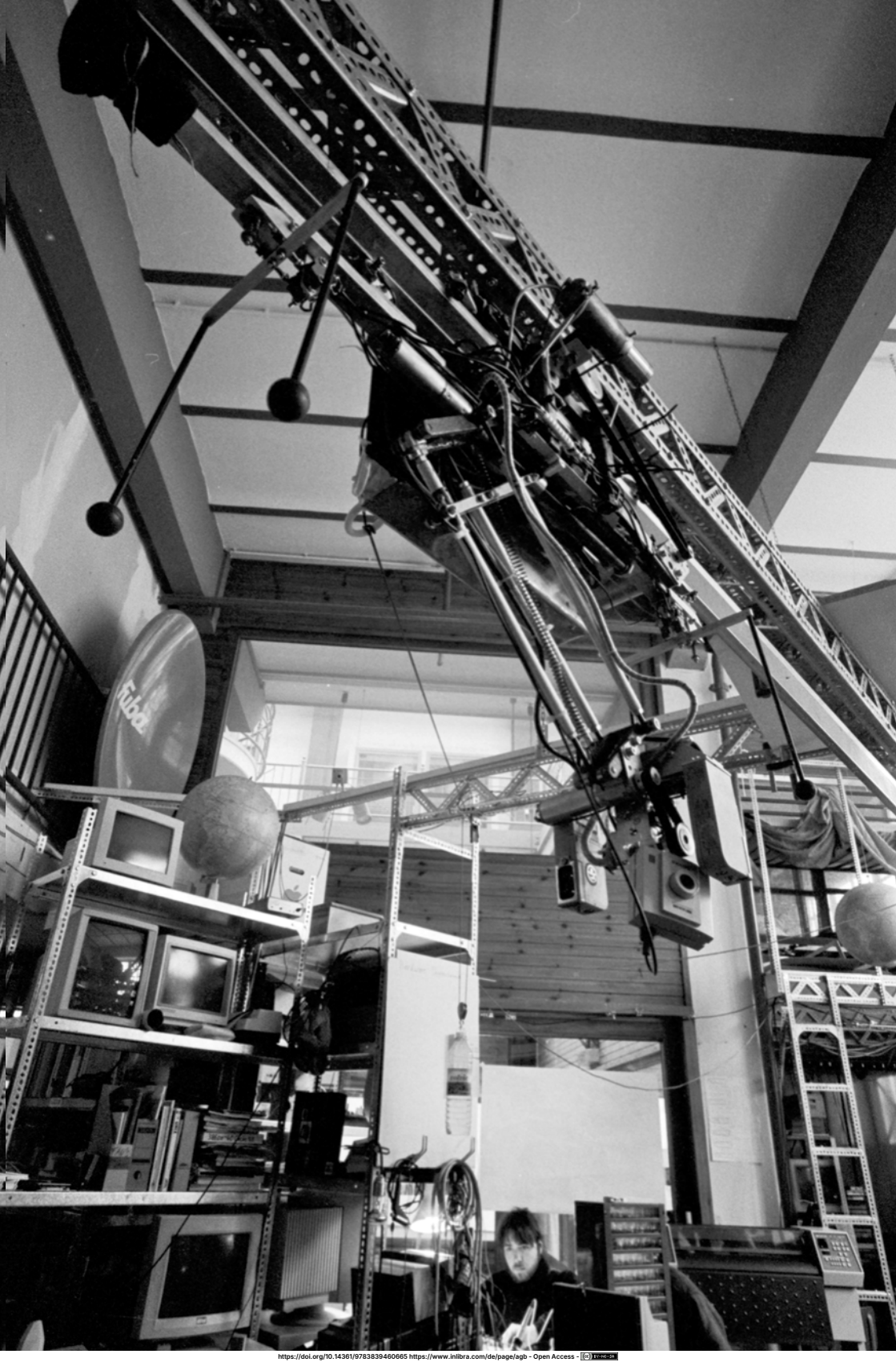

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The more reliable the technical operation was, the more playful the handling of the camera became. Callers are guided through the studio containers by Karel Dudesek and other staff members. He explains the camera's movement possibilities and points out the various work areas, furnishings and staff as if he were showing a real visitor around. This creates a strong impression of telepresence and the viewer has an almost physical impression of the working situation and the spatial conditions in the container studio. After the end of *Piazza virtuale*, the robot camera was installed in the Ponton media lab in Hamburg. (*tb*)

A1.12 Interact with Piazza People

(also: Inter-ACT with Piazza People)

Broadcast dates:

26 June, 11 July, 18 July, 9 August, 16 August, 23 August, 26 August 1992 (3sat)

Description:

Interact with Piazza People was rarely seen on *Piazza virtuale*. It featured live performances by Van Gogh TV staff and their guests in Kassel. In the opening credits, the audience was invited to interact with the performers by phone or even come in person to the studio in Kassel. The shows, only six in all, ran mainly at weekends long after midnight.

Interact with Piazza People was the only segment of *Piazza virtuale* that took up the entire screen. The live images were merely framed by digital light bulbs flashing in different colours; in some, digital animations or images from the studio are added in the background via green screen. A telephone number can be seen at the bottom; two telephones signal that only two callers can get through on this programme.

The first broadcast on 26 June 1992 has two musicians performing with electrically amplified violin and electronic drums. There is no interaction with the callers. On 11 July 1992, an Italian group is featured, singing pop and folk songs. Some of the callers sing along on the phone, but there are also some others who try to disrupt the concert by making noises. The singers talk to the callers between the songs. This is followed by a solo performance using synthesisers and other electronic instruments. A caller raps along in Italian.

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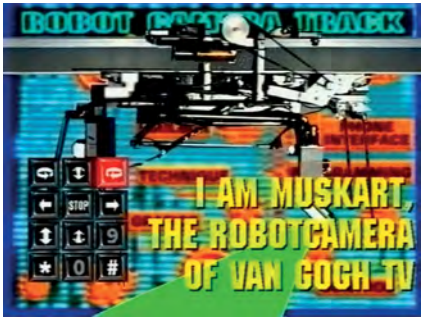

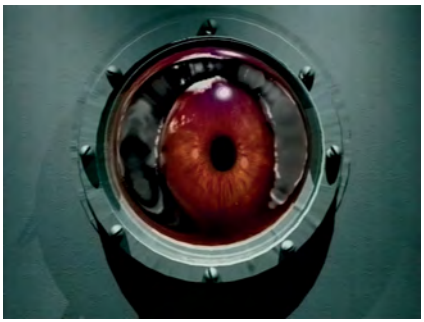

Screenshots from the segments Muskart Robotcam, Interact with Piazza People, Moby Dick´s Eye and Sarah & Daniel (from top)

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The techno duo C-Trans performs on 18 July 1992 using synthesisers and samplers; they involve the audience in their performance from the very beginning and explicitly ask them to join in. The callers partly respond to this, making noises, shouting and making percussion sounds on the phone. However, musical participation is hampered by the long delays, meaning that one cannot sing or drum along and basically only sound effects can be contributed. Occasionally, the musicians sample sounds from the phone calls and integrate them into their tracks.

On 14 August, the most ambitious collaboration of all the contributors to *Piazza virtuale* can be seen. The 90-minute programme was organised by *Piazza virtuale* press spokesman and art historian Ludwig Seyfarth and is entitled "Für die Vögel oder: Random beauty" (For the birds or: Random beauty). It is dedicated to the memory of John Cage, who had died two days earlier in New York and in whose honour "chance operations" are performed in Kassel and by some Piazzettas.

The longest *Interact with Piazza People* took place on the night of 15 to 16 August. In Italy, 15 August is "Ferragosto", the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and a holiday dating back to Roman antiquity that is celebrated throughout the country. Van Gogh TV member Salvatore Vanasco, himself a native of Sicily, invited Italian restaurant owners from Kassel to celebrate the holiday together in the courtyard between the studio containers. The restaurateurs cooked for the group and their guests. The celebration is broadcast live for almost an hour. There are musical performances by the restaurateurs and at a late hour the Hamburg techno act Sparkling Sun performs. Some of the local Italians in Kassel get into the music and use the techno sound as background music for greetings to the world and conversations with the callers.

On 9 August 1992 there is an "Interactive Butoh Dance" in which the audience, if not the dance performance itself, can at least give instructions to the cameraman. Here, too, the audience participates. One of the callers tests the limits of this offer by asking the cameraman to film himself, which he does.

On 23 August 1992, at 3 a.m., the Austrian band The Ganslingers performs at the Olympus Party, for which regular callers to the show from all over Germany had come to Kassel to get to know each other as well as the Van Gogh TV staff. On 26 August, folklore ensemble Bibikon from Yaroslav in Russia performs. Although the group plays without responding to the callers' reactions, there are some surprisingly successful contributions by the audience, for example when a caller spontaneously falls into a kind of scat-singing that

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fits the music. On the last day of broadcasting *Piazza virtuale*, most of the programme's staff introduce themselves in a kind of "end credits".

Interact with Piazza People is one of the most entertaining segments of *Piazza virtuale*, with at times surprising and successful interactions between performers and callers. That begs the question why it was not broadcast more often. The organisation of concerts and performances may require a certain amount of effort. However, considering the fact that many callers developed a certain familiarity with the makers of *Piazza virtuale* over time, there would certainly have been interest in interacting with them more often. (*tb*)

A1.13 Moby Dick's Eye

(also: Moby Dicks Auge)

Broadcast dates (selection):

22 August–14 September 1992 daily for one hour from 9 or 10 pm (Olympus) 11 September–20 September 1992 daily in the morning programme on 3sat with a broadcast duration of 5–20 minutes

Description:

Moby Dick's Eye was conceived and hosted by artist Hermann Josef Hack from Bonn. It ran every evening for three weeks with a length of one hour on the Olympus satellite and nine times in the morning broadcasts on 3sat. Hermann Josef Hack was influenced by the idea of "social sculpture" by Josef Beuys and repeatedly used participatory elements in his work.[1] Even before his collaboration with Van Gogh TV, he installed his "Idea Collectors" or "Deposition Traps" on board research ships, aircraft, research platforms, in public spaces and even on the D2 space mission, where ideas about the future and utopian ideas could be collected. He also gave space travellers and marine researchers self-designed colouring books.

As with Van Gogh TV, the founding of artistic organisations and the play with the iconography of companies, authorities and institutions is also an important concept for Hack. In 1991, for example, he founded the Global Brainstorming Project, which was intended to promote dialogue on questi-

1 Interview with Hermann Josef Hack, 18 April 2019.

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ons of the future within the framework of art and for which he designed its own logo, stationery, postcards, stamps and brochures. From 1990 to 1997, he was the art commissioner of the Federal Ministry of Research and Technology in Bonn and therefore had contact with researchers at state-funded institutions as well as with Telekom, which has its headquarters in Bonn and through which he had access to then state-of-the-art technology – such as videophones – which were used in the broadcasts. He used these contacts as well as the prestige of his position at the ministry to aid in the preparation of his projects. Correspondence concerning the work of Van Gogh TV was conducted on ministry stationery, and in these letters it was frequently emphasised that the Ministry of Research supported the project.

Hermann Josef Hack had come into contact with Van Gogh TV through the gallerist Hans Jürgen Müller from Stuttgart, with whom he shared an interest in media as a communication tool for artistic projects. "I always found it exciting to open the back channel", he says in our interview about his understanding of "art as an act of communication", and this interest also characterises *Moby Dick's Eye*, which he conceived for *Piazza virtuale*.

In the show – as in Hack's following projects – dialogue via videophone was established between state-funded scientific institutions in inaccessible places, here primarily with the North Sea research platform off Helgoland, the Institute for Marine Research and the research ships *Gauss* and *Poseidon*. The callers could ask the scientists questions about their work and everyday life. Hack: "The idea of 'Moby Dick's Eye' was to bring the passive viewer together with interesting content, that adds meaning to his life and makes him a co-actor [...] [The viewer should understand] what the scientists are doing there. Does that have anything to do with me?" Hack himself is always present as a host during these conversations, introducing the participants, keeping the conversation going when there are no questions from the callers, passing on questions asked in the chat or providing background information. The broadcasting management in Kassel also takes part in the conversations. Although there are also viewers who try to chat on other subjects, the moderation usually keeps them to the given topic.

The callers' questions concern the research goals and the everyday work of the scientists. What do they learn from their work? Who pays for the research projects? What are the earning opportunities? How do the scientists spend their free time? Often topics are raised that concern the callers personally, such as the cleanliness of the water in the North Sea for their next

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holiday or the question of whether North Sea fish are contaminated by pollution. Also, climate change is already being discussed at that time. One senses the effort of some scientists to make their work transparent to the audience without lapsing into scientific jargon. In the direct confrontation between laypeople and scientists, however, topics also come up that go beyond the scope of scientific technical questions, for example when a female caller asks about the number of woman researchers on board.

The interface designed by Ole Lüttgens refers to the iconography of the sea and shipping. In the centre of the screen there is a radar screen that turns into a blood-red whale's eye. The images from the videophones on the ships and from Hermann Josef Hack can be seen in small rectangles at the top left and right of the screen. At the bottom, as in other formats, the computer chat takes up a third of the monitor. The format was well received by the audience, and seems to have been popular with the staff of *Piazza virtuale* as well. In the notes of a staff meeting, *Moby Dick's Eye* is explicitly mentioned as a show that should be continued.

Hermann Josef Hack worked with Van Gogh TV again in 1994 at the Hamburg Mediale, where he produced six interactive television programmes in which the audience could again discuss with scientists via videophone. These programmes were also broadcast on 3sat. After that, he continued to work on telecommunication and satellite projects, such as the 1994 Polar Night event at the Siegburg Art Museum, where he established a videophone connection between researchers at the North and South Poles and visitors to the exhibition. In the same year, he organised a video conference between the crew of the research ship *Polarstern* in the Antarctic and visitors to the Museum Koenig, the museum of natural history in Bonn.

In Germany, Hack was one of the first artists to use the internet as a medium, such as in the internet project Virtual Roof or hack-i.de; he also dealt with the internet in paintings (*Internet-Barock*, 1998). Many of his projects addressing social problems reached a large audience through actions in public space and the mass media, such as the *Arme-Socken-Teppich* (Poor Sock Carpet, since 1998), which was knotted from the socks of unemployed people and laid out in front of Gerhard Schröder's polling station and the Federal Chancellery, among other places. For his *World Climate Refugee Camp* (since 2007), he set up miniature refugee camps made of over 1000 tents in the centre of European capitals to draw attention to the victims of climate change. (*tb*)

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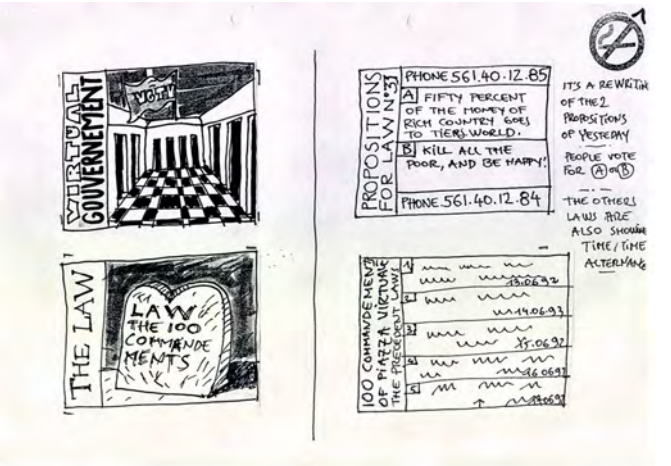

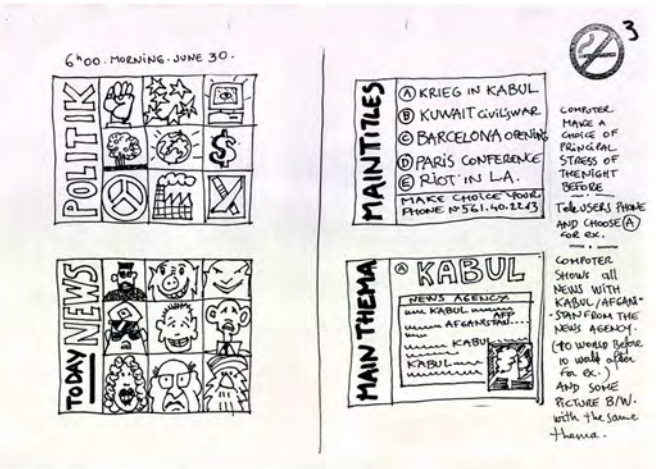

Storyboard for unrealized segment on politics by Gerald Couty

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A1.14 Unrealised ideas

In notes and minutes from the planning phase of *Piazza virtuale* there are numerous ideas that were not realised. They include, for example, a cooking show and a show in which rumours were to be spread and relationships "outed", a show for children and one with art criticism, an events calendar and a show in which letters to the editor were to be read aloud. In one show, the content was to be decided by throwing dice and at one point there was the idea for an "interactive torture programme".

Many ideas aim to involve the audience in Kassel in the show more than *Piazza virtuale* eventually did. Some of these ideas made their way in modified form into *Piazza virtuale*. The "Ländersendungen" (country shows) possibly developed into the Piazzettas. And even if there was no "entry point picphone in public cafes and pubs (e.g. Venezia, just around the corner)", there were the Access Points with video camera and microphone next to the Van Gogh TV studio, which broadcast live at *Piazza virtuale*.

An undated note that was probably written during the immediate preparation for *Piazza virtuale* mentions some ideas that were apparently being worked on at that time: "Politics", "Theatre TV", "Art Discussion" and "A Story Told", none of which, however, appeared in the final show. A planned "writing format" only appeared in "School", but was not included in the broadcast. (*tb*)

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Mike Hentz at Piazetta Riga
Photo: Janis Deinarts

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Appendix 2 The Piazzettas

Parts of *Piazza virtuale* were provided by the so-called "piazzettas". These were two dozen groups and initiatives that produced broadcasts on their own in cities in Europe and Japan. The contributions of these initiatives were transmitted to Kassel via videophone, either with an analog Panasonic videophone in slow-scan mode or by ISDN videophone. However, some Piazzettas also transmitted at least temporarily by satellite.

The Piazzettas started to broadcast in late June 1992. The groups had to register by fax the day before and were then given an airtime, which was entered on daily broadcast schedules. As more and more piazzettas participated in the last weeks of "Piazza virtuale", there were sometimes scheduling conflicts. Salvatore Vanasco was responsible for the coordination of the German piazzettas, Mike Hentz organized the international piazzettas with contacts from the network he had built up through his artistic work with various groups accross Europe.

Some of the piazzettas – such as in Hamburg or Cologne – contributed during the entire broadcasting period, others – such as Bremen, Geneva or Zurich – were limited to a few shows. Some of the piazzettas cooperated with each other during their shows. Graz and Vienna broadcasted together for the most part, but there were also spontaneous, one-off collaborations, for example between the piazzettas in Cologne and Bremen or Hamburg and Paris.

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A2.1 Berlin

Organisers: Gesellschaft zur Förderung und Pflege interdisziplinärer Kommunikation (GFPIK) (Society for the Promotion and Maintenance of Interdisciplinary Communication);
Kulturverein WARTEN;
Project management: Rudolf Stoehrt/Frank Kunkel
Participants: Manfred Schmidt (equipment); Andreas Geradert (system management), Hans Hübner (system management), Thomas Kaulmann (system management and chat moderation), Robert Rothe (system management), Sascha Zumbusch (system management and chat moderation), Dana Bourdan (Frauen und Technik (FuT): mobile team), Armin Haase (video and computer animation), Jörg Langkau (computer animation), Pit Schultz (fax-based image processing), Antya Umstätter (video support), Petra Herrmann (press relations), Anja Schubert (press relations), Daniel Pflumm, Inga Knölcke, Tom Dieckmann, Natascha Sadr Haghighian.

Broadcast dates (selection):

16 August 1992, 11:03–11:15; 20 August 1992, 11:40–11:53 (all 3sat)

Description:

The organiser of the Berlin Piazzetta was the writer Rudolf Stoert, who co-edited the culture magazine *Warten*, in which he had published a long interview with Benjamin Heidersberger, Karel Dudesek and Salvatore Vanasco about Ponton and Van Gogh TV before *Piazza virtuale*.[1] In an initial letter to Van Gogh TV he writes that he wants to continue the concept of this magazine, which publishes a lot of interviews and talks, at the Piazzetta. In a proposal for the Piazzetta, planned contributions include: *Partyzone* (where the mobile team was to visit Berlin clubs), *Kontakthof* ("contact zone", a partner exchange), *Informationsbörse* ("information exchange", that was to deliver "rumours and trash talk, gossip and local event information, but also current information from databases and computer networks"), *Reiseberichte* ("a travelogue about exciting places in the international data network") and *Stammtisch* (a "regular's table" to "finally give the whole world a piece of your mind"). Not all of these ideas were realised.

1 Stoert, Rudolf: Lustig, dass es unterhalte, Ponton European Media Archive, Interview/Text-Collage, Warten. Das Magazin, Nr. 2 (1991), S. 125 - 188

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From 16 August 1992, Berlin's Piazzetta broadcast from the city's Haus Podewil, the former East Berlin Haus der jungen Talente (House of Young Talents), where they had set up their own broadcasting studio including an internet café with VT-100 terminals, which was open around the clock and became a meeting place for a young scene interested in media and art even outside broadcasting hours. The city magazine *Tip* wrote about "an electronic coffee house" where one could "hack one's input directly into the terminals, which are publicly accessible there".[2] Since co-organiser Thomax Kaulmann was already running the internet provider Contributed Software at that time, there was access to the internet, and the chat in the Van Gogh TV mailbox was used more by the Berlin Piazzetta than by the others. In our interview, Thomax Kaulmann emphasises the social significance of the Berlin Piazzetta: "In my opinion, the interesting thing was this coming together of these different scenes in Berlin, because a lot came out of that."[3]

Pit Schulz shares this view:

> We met there for the first time. And not only us, but also in Hamburg, or […] in Riga. It was at an important time, the transition from the old mass media to the digital network-based media. [*Piazza virtuale*] was one of the decisive projects that brought together exactly the right people: Artists and technicians […], a network of actors … We had a small media lab, and that's where it started. People made things by themselves, which were not necessarily used to be broadcast afterwards.[4]

The Berlin Piazzetta was inspired by the subculture that emerged in post-reunification Berlin. There were "video mixes" – as in the techno clubs of that time – and music performances; among others, the band Meine Lieblingsband and the Berlin Nose Flute Orchestra performed during the 3sat night programme. In addition to the musical and artistic performances, there were political segments, including a discussion with the organisation Jugend gegen Rassismus (Youth against Racism) about the right-wing riots in Rostock–Lichtenhagen. But there were also technical demonstrations that would be called "tutorials" today, including a presentation of a database and an internet modem.

2 Liebherr, Christoph, "Coffee House Van Gogh", *Tip* 17, 1992.

3 Interview with Thomax Kaulmann, 6 June 2018.

4 Interview with Pit Schultz, 6 June 2018.

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There were conflicts between Piazzetta Berlin and Van Gogh TV over the content of the show. In a fax dated 23 August 1992, some members of the Berlin group even terminated the collaboration, but the Piazzetta Berlin programmes continued to run as usual. Reasons for the termination are not given in the fax, but one point of conflict was that the Berlin group wanted to broadcast pre-produced videos by Berlin artists Daniel Pflumm and Gereon Schmitz, whose video loops were shown in Berlin clubs like WMF as a visual supplement to the DJ performance. This idea contradicted the communicative concept of *Piazza virtuale*. Pit Schulz even went to Kassel on 29 July 1992 to promote these video broadcasts, but without success. Nevertheless, excerpts from the video work *Hello TV* by Daniel Pflumm, which he created for his bar Elektro, can be seen in a broadcast of 5 September. For the video, he asked people in nightlife and on the street to say the word "Hello" into the camera; the work ran silently in the bar, which was one of the nuclei of the Berlin techno scene. Because so many callers to *Piazza virtuale* answered with "Hello", "Hello TV" also became the programme's mock name.

From 30 June 1992, *Piazza virtuale* was also broadcast daily between 11 p.m. and midnight on the Berlin cable channel FAB (Fernsehen aus Berlin). FAB was a private station founded in 1991 by a group of film and television producers. Van Gogh TV had already worked with the station in 1991 when it broadcast *Ballroom TV* from the Berlin discotheque 90 Grad. No recordings of the FAB broadcasts are available, only the programming schedule. They show that programmes such as *Medialandscape*, *Sarah und Daniel*, *Beichtstuhl*, *Atelier*, *Classical Orchestra* and *Coffeehouse*, which ran on 3sat, were also shown here; *Marktplatz*, which had to be withdrawn from 3sat after a few broadcasts, continued to be shown on FAB. From 16 August until the end of *Piazza virtuale*, Berlin's Piazzetta provided programming for FAB between 23:00 and 23:55.

The regular broadcast on FAB may have contributed to the fact that an above-average number of Berliners also called in to the 3sat show. Their conversations on air provide evidence that the Berlin callers sometimes also spoke to each other on the phone outside the broadcasts or possibly even met in person.

Some of the contributors to the Berlin Piazzetta were among the most important protagonists of internet culture in Berlin in the 1990s. Armin Haase was a member of the artist group Handshake in *Feldreise* (Fieldtrip, 1993), one of the earliest internet art projects in Germany. Together with other Berlin Piazzetta members such as Pit Schulz, Thomas Kaulmann and Frank Kunkel, he was also one of the founders of the Internationale Stadt

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internet project, which was a predecessor of social media and hosted many early internet artworks by artists such as JODI, Eva Grubinger and others. Internationale Stadt also hosted Clubnetz, where they set up terminals at the Love Parade and in Berlin clubs such as Tresor and E-Werk so that visitors to different clubs could chat with each other.

From 1999, Schulz and Kaulmann also ran Klubradio, a website that streamed DJ and live sets from Berlin clubs – a concept that was later turned into a business model by London's Boilerroom. Both were also among the co-founders of Mikro e.V., which organised monthly events on internet culture in the Berlin club WMF and the Wizards of OS congress in the late 1990s. In addition, Kaulmann ran the internet radio station Orang Orang. The internet radio station reboot.fm and Bootlab, probably the first Berlin co-working space, also emerged from this scene. In 1995 Pit Schulz together with Geert Lovink founded nettime, an influential mailing list for internet culture and politics that still exists today. Antya Umstätter and Natascha Sadr Haghighian, who contributed to the Berlin Piazzetta, are active today as artists and university lecturers. Haghighian participated in documenta in 2012 and exhibited under the pseudonym Natascha Süder Happelmann in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2019. (*tb*)

A2.2 Bremen

Organisers: Students of the Bremen University of the Arts
Participants: Ronald Gonko, Ole Wulfers, Tobias Küch, Rachid Ali Khan, Beate Skiba, Hank Normann, Katrin Orth, Veronika My, Daniela Aligeri, Martina Schall, Joschi Jung, Prof. Gerd Dahlmann among others.

Broadcast dates (selection):

11 July, 3–5 August, 22 August, 10 September 1992 (3sat).

Description:

The Bremen "Piazza Telematica" was organised by students from the Bremen University of the Arts. Some of them came from Professor Gerd Dahlmann's experimental film class, but students from the departments of Painting and

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Architecture were also involved. Fellow students Ronald Gonko and Axel Roselius, who was later responsible for computer graphics at *Piazza virtuale* in Kassel, had seen *Hotel Pompino*, a project Van Gogh TV had done at Ars Electronica in 1990, on 3sat and contacted the group. They were invited to a symposium at the art academy in Hamburg, where Mike Hentz was a professor at the time, and also took part in "interactive training" as part of Universcity TV, another Ponton Media Lab project, which was a kind of boot camp for the Piazzettas' work.[5]

The live broadcast of the Piazzetta in Bremen was transmitted to Kassel via a videophone, which was connected to the ISDN network. As with some of the other Piazzettas, the ISDN connection had to be set up first. The Piazzetta was financially supported by the Media Department of the Senator for Youth and Culture, the Bremen Film Office and Telekom.

The Bremen Piazzetta broadcast daily from 3 to 16 August 1992. On weekdays it was aired during the morning show. It occasionally also provided short segments for other shows. One broadcast was in cooperation with the Piazzetta of Bremen's twin city Riga, and another with the Piazzetta Cologne. On several occasions, broadcasts were also made from other locations, one from Café Kairo, one from the pedestrian zone in Bremen and one from a branch of electronics market Saturn, where passers-by were interviewed on the subject of consumption and television.

The influence of performance, experimental film and video art on the Bremen art students is obvious in most of their productions. These were characterised by a visual language reminiscent of the video art of that period and are informed by the garish colour palette of the Amiga computers of the time. Through the intensive use of image mixers, colour effects and superimpositions, sometimes astonishing image compositions were created. For example, in a picture of former East German head of state Erich Honecker the eyes and mouth were replaced with images of the facial expressions of a performer in the studio. In another broadcast, Roland Gonko was filmed with cameras from different perspectives as he moved back and forth in response to instructions from callers. These images were stitched together in such a way that the different perspectives created the impression of a grotesque body. (*tb*)

5 Interview with Roland Gonko, 22 February 2019.

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A2.3 Earth – Space Shuttle Atlantis

Organisers: National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) (Andrew Work)
Participants: Harald Weisser (Piazzetta Göttingen) among others

Broadcast dates:

August 1992, 11:45–12:15 (3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Earth was a live broadcast from the outboard camera of the Space Shuttle Atlantis on the morning of 8 August 1992. Atlantis was at the end of NASA's STS-46 mission at the time, so viewers of *Piazza virtuale* were able to witness part of its last hours in space.

At the beginning of the transmission, a caller complained that no telephone connection had yet been established with the astronauts. However, this was neither planned nor announced. For a large part of the broadcast, the Göttingen Piazzetta was on air by video phone in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. Its member Harald Weisser chatted with the callers, who were particularly fascinated by the fact that he had a video phone in his flat.

Hermann Josef Hack, who was responsible for the *Moby Dick's Eye* segment of *Piazza virtuale*, attempted to organise another broadcast of this kind in collaboration with the Mir space station. He sent a fax to the Mission Control Centre of the Russian space agency in Kaliningrad dated 28 August 1992. Hack had planned a telephone connection to the cosmonauts so that the callers could ask the crew questions, as in *Moby Dick's Eye*. That did not materialise.

The basic idea and aesthetics of Piazzetta Earth was to find a permanent broadcasting slot on public television two years later. In the show *Space Night* of Bayerischer Rundfunk, transmissions from the outboard cameras of space shuttles and science satellites were shown in the night-time programme of ARD-alpha and BR Fernsehen from June 1994. (*jw*)

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A2.4 Freiburg

Organisers: Brainspace Café/Theater Freiburg (15th Freiburg Theatre Festival)
Participants: Micky Remann (moderator and coordinator of the Brainspace Café) among others

Broadcast date:

6 September 1992, 01:38–02:00 (3sat)

Description:

As part of the 15th Freiburg Theatre Festival, the media artist and writer Micky Remann presented the project *Brainspace Café*. On the night of 6 September, Remann broadcast black and white still images via slow-scan videophone. Here, the entry-point in Kassel can be seen in the split screen, where five Piazzetta staff members look into the camera and occasionally join in the conversation. The video from Kassel was temporarily replaced by the viewers' fax transmissions.

Within the theatre festival, the *Brainspace Café* dealt with connections between neurology, computer science and art. Various artistic applications were presented that used brain waves or electrodermal activity, such as devices that translated brain waves into acoustic signals on a keyboard. From today's perspective, it is striking how topical the questions about neuronal and digital networks that Remann raised in his project at the time seem in view of current developments.

This was followed by a live performance by the rock band Raiders of the Rainbow, which, however, could hardly be heard due to callers who had now joined in the *Piazza virtuale*. Afterwards, Micky Remann, sitting on a stage, explained the show in detail. The broadcast of Piazzetta Freiburg ended abruptly after barely 20 minutes of airtime. (*jw*)

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A2.5 Frankfurt/Main

Organisers: Trust Corporate Culture GmbH
Participants: Karel Dudesek, Fritz Grosz, Michael Todt and others

Broadcast date:

12 September 1992, 11:12–11:45 (3sat)

Description:

The Piazzetta of Frankfurt am Main was organised by the advertising and communications agency Trust Corporate Culture, which held an "Interactive TV Brunch" on that day at its premises in Frankfurt's Ostend district. At the beginning, a Trust employee who had travelled from Frankfurt to the documenta was at the video telephone in Kassel and greeted her colleagues. In turn, Karel Dudesek had gone to Frankfurt and called on people from the neighbourhood to come to the agency to participate in the Piazzetta. The agency's premises were open to visitors. Guests already present took advantage of the opportunity to appear in the broadcast or to have messages or drawings faxed in. (*jw*)

A2.6 Geneva

Organisers: Universcity TV Genève
Participants: Nicola Buri, Fred Reug and Philippe Coeytaux

Broadcast dates:

3, 8, 6, 10 September 1992 (3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Geneva broadcast on four dates in September 1992. It was organised during the Festival de la Batie, a festival of theatre, music and dance in Geneva, by Nicola Buri, Fred Reug and Philippe Coeytaux, who operated under the moniker Universcity TV Genève. During the four broadcasts, which took place in the self-managed cultural centre L'Usine, callers are encoura-

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ged to engage in discussions in various ways. The show was broadcast using the Telekom ISDN videophone that had previously been used at Piazzetta Zurich. The picture quality is therefore relatively good. Apart from a few experiments with the video mixer, there are no visual effects; the interlocutors sit in front of the camera with a microphone and talk to the TV audience.

The first show is about the question whether *Piazza virtuale* is art. An alleged art historian is invited to speak critically about the format and claims that the project isn't art. On the call is Piazzetta Paris, where the artist Christian Vanderborght places the project in the context of Dada, Situationism, Performance Art and Mail Art, and explains it as a new form of art in which communication processes are central. This develops into a debate with some of the callers about contemporary art and *Piazza virtuale*, which is, however, ridiculed by other callers.

In the second show, a painting of a young woman is repeatedly inserted. The audience is invited to search for her at documenta. In the third show, which is again carried out in collaboration with Piazzetta Paris, the audience is supposed to debate Europe and the European Union. Twice, a caller wants to discuss the asylum seekers in Europe; another criticises the open borders policy for bringing drugs into the EU. Still other callers express positive views about Europe. During the last broadcast, which took place on a Saturday night at around 3 a.m., Piazzetta Paris is once again involved. Because there is a loud performance going on in Paris and probably also because of the late hour, almost no meaningful conversation takes place.

"Trans-continental, trans-lingual, trans-media misunderstanding entertainment", comments Karel Dudesek after the end of the broadcast from the studio in Kassel, thus summarising the content of many Piazzetta broadcasts at *Piazza virtuale*. (*tb*)

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A2.7 Göttingen

Organisers/Group/Initiative:
A student flat-share in Göttingen
Participants: Harald Weisser, Claudia Trepte, Martin Hasselblatt

Broadcast dates:

Friday, 25 July 1992, 01:45–02:00 and unannounced for short segments during various programmes

Description:

Piazzetta Göttingen broadcast with a videophone from a student apartment. Christian Wolff, one of the Van Gogh TV staffers, had invited his school friend Harald Weisser from his home town to take part in *Piazza virtuale*. The broadcast location in the kitchen of the apartment, where the hosts speak directly into the camera, is reminiscent of contemporary influencers on YouTube or TikTok, albeit here with the possibility of direct, verbal reaction from the callers. The group created only one quarter-hour programme in which they show their own video footage from documenta (including an installation by Mike Kelley that included a mobile toilet with a loudspeaker system facing outwards) and attempt to discuss modern art with the viewers. During some *Coffeehouse* broadcasts, transmissions of student parties from Göttingen can be seen in one of the windows on the screen, but without sound. (*tb*)

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A.2.8 Vienna and Graz

*Organisers/Group/Initiative:*Pyramedia, ZERO.net in collaboration with Dead Dog Gallery, MEDA.TM and ORF-Kunstradio
Participants: Rosa von Suess, Kurt Hentschläger, Ulf Langheinrich (all Vienna), Gerfried Stocker, Robert Adrian X, Seppo Gründler (all Graz) among others

Broadcast dates:

26 July 1992, 01:36–02:15 (Piazzetta Vienna – 3sat), 15 August 1992, 01:45–02:15 (Piazzetta Vienna and Graz – 3sat), 16 August 1992, 03:00–03:30 (Piazzetta Vienna and Graz – 3sat)

Description:

In Austria, one Piazzetta was founded in Vienna and one in Graz. They cooperated for much of their broadcast time on *Piazza virtuale*. The Vienna Piazzetta was organized by local media art collective Pyramedia. The Graz counterpart emerged from the early internet art project ZERO.net by Gerfried Stocker and Robert Adrian X. Adrian, originally from Canada, moved to Austria in the 1970s and became a pioneer in the field of telecommunications art, which gave rise to a lively movement in Austria in the 1980s and 1990s. His most important project was *The World in 24 Hours* at Ars Electronica in 1984.[6]

Media art, telecommunication and internet projects were and are supported by the government in Austria, for instance by hosting media art festival Ars Electronica in Linz. Minus Delta T, the predecessor group of Van Gogh TV, benefited from this infrastructure and presented its *Bangkok Project* at Ars Electronica. Van Gogh TV had produced its interactive television project *Hotel Pompino* at Ars Electronica in 1990, which was broadcast by ORF and 3sat and institutionally prepared for *Piazza virtuale*. The ZERO.net

6 See Gehrmann, Lucas; Matt, Gerald (eds.), *Robert Adrian*, Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2001; Grundmann, Heidi, *Art & Telecommunication*, Vancouver/Vienna: Western Front/Vienna, 1984; Baumgärtel, Tilman, "Der Raum hinter dem Monitor: Interview with the Canadian telecommunications pioneer Robert Adrian X", *Telepolis*, 17 August 1997, https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Interview-mit-dem-kanadischen-Telekommunikations-Pionier-Robert-Adrian-X-3446070.html

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Ole Lüttjens and Rosa von Suess at the Piazetta Vienna at Kunsthalle Exnergasse

project, which initiated the Graz Piazzetta, had formed in 1992. This was an international network that used computer Bulletin Board systems (BBS) to create art, especially in the fields of sound art and hypertext.[7]

The Austrian Piazzettas were supported by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education and the Arts, the Vienna Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus (WUK) and the Styrian Cultural Initiative. Furthermore, the media artist Rosa von Suess, who was involved in Pyramedia, was at that time a collaborator in the *Kunstradio* show at ORF.

The first broadcast of Piazzetta Wien took place on 26 July 1992 without participation from Graz. It was broadcast from Kunsthalle Exnergasse. In the first few minutes of the broadcast, only still images of the participants in Vienna could be seen on the screen. This was because of problems with the

7 See Naveau, Manuela, *Crowd and Art – Kunst und Partizipation im Internet*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2013, pp. 117–123.

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sound signal. When these were solved, one participant explained that about 300 people had gathered and were looking forward to the communication on *Piazza virtuale*. However, this came about only hesitantly. A dialogue was made difficult at times by the fact that participants on the videophone in Kassel could be heard only through loud hissing or distortion.

In the two subsequent broadcasts on 15 and 16 August, the two Piazzettas each had their own window above that of the modem chat. They each ran their own computer graphics, photographs, still images and short computer animations, a "multimedia mix".

The concept of the Austrian Piazzettas was to convert the signals of the touch-tone telephones of callers at the three networked locations (Vienna, Graz and the studio in Kassel) into MIDI signals to control synthesizers in order to create a common composition. Recordings of the resulting audio material were subsequently edited by the artist Ulf Langheinrich and broadcast on ORF's *Kunstradio*.

In retrospect, both Rosa von Suess and Gerfried Stocker are critical of the lack of communication with the callers.[8] In view of the circumstances of the production, Ulf Langheinrich pointed out that it was an unusual communication situation for both the audience and the artists involved. Entering such interactive "uncharted territory" had made a profound exchange difficult.[9]

Rosa von Suess remains active in the fields of art, video and new media, earned her doctorate at the University of Art in Linz and is now a professor at the University of Applied Sciences in St Pölten. Gerfried Stocker is now director of Ars Electronica in Linz. Kurt Hentschläger and Ulf Langheinrich worked together in the 1990s under the name Granular Synthesis and continue to be active as artists; likewise Seppo Gründler. (*jw*)

8 Interview with Gerfried Stocker, 18 July 2018; Interview with Rosa von Suess, 19 July 2018.

9 See Langheinrich in "Piazzetta Vienna", http://www.kunstradio.at

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A2.9 Hamburg (Frauen und Technik)

Organisers: Frauen und Technik (Women and Technology): Ellen Nonnenmacher, Bettina Schoeller, Lore Piatkowski, Ania Corcilius, Cornelia Sollfrank, Korinna Knoll, Annette Kisling, Silke Mauritius, Janine Sack, Christine Bader

Broadcast dates (selection):

24 July, 12.20; 25 July, 11:20; 29 July, 11:30; 7–8 August, 03:00; 8–9 August, 03:00; 11 August, 11.03; 14–15 August, 04:30; 15–16 August, 04:05; 16 August, 11:30; 17 August, 11:50; 21 August, 03:40; 22–23 August, 04:00 and 05:20; 24 August, 11:55; 26 August, 12:05; 28–29 August, 04:15; 29–30 August, 04:14; 30 August, 11:10; 1 September, 11:30; 5–6 September, 03:10; 10 September, 01:56; 12–13 September, 01:56; 12–13 September, 03:15; 04:00; 04:30

Participation in the shows at Piazzetta Köln

Description:

The group Frauen und Technik (Women and Technology) was founded in Hamburg in 1990 by ten female art students from the University of Fine Arts. Mike Hentz was a professor there at the time, and that is why the art school took part in Universcity TV, a Van Gogh TV project in which educational institutions and other media initiatives worked on joint media projects. From the 1992 Ars Electronica catalogue: "Universities, colleges, schools and private groups are invited to present their visions of a new television, a new television aesthetic. What is called for is a lively engagement with technology in a playful way."[10]

Universcity TV activities in which students from the Hamburg Art School participated included various live television projects, among others at the Hamburg media festival Interface or for the Offener Kanal, as well as the organisation of a meeting of Universcity members from other cities, which was also documented in a book publication designed by the students.[11]

10 *Ars Electronica 1990* (programme), Linz: Ars Electronica, 1990, unpaginated.

11 Knoll, Corinna; Lammert, Olivert; Phroehlich, Christoph, *University TV: Das Projekt*, Hamburg (Universcity TV Headquarters, undated).

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Frauen und Technik did their Piazzetta from Ponton´s lab in Hamburg.

Among the contributors who later took part in Frauen und Technik were Janine Sack and Silke Mauritius. Frauen und Technik was a collective with a common "corporate identity", thus addressing not only questions of individual and joint authorship but also the increasing influence of cultural sponsorship and branding for the arts.

At *Piazza virtuale* they were among the most active participants of the Piazzettas with almost 30 broadcasts. For their participation, they made a considerable commitment of their own: their shows were produced in Ponton's office in the Hamburg Arts and Crafts building Koppel 66, which Frauen und Technik rented for DM500 "excluding telephone charges" from 1 July to 30 August 1992, while Van Gogh TV was in Kassel at documenta.[12] Various technical devices such as computers, modems, televisions and video recorders were available to them there, including the Panasonic videophone as well as an ISDN videophone, which was used for the broadcasts.

12 Undated draft of a contract between Women and Technology and Ponton European Media Art Lab, Hamburg, "represented by Mr. Dudesek".

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According to Cornelia Sollfrank, the attraction of *Piazza virtuale* was that it was possible to try out approaches from performance art in front of an anonymous mass audience on television, as she said in our interview, "not in a room where you interact directly, but with an anonymous audience, and still have a backchannel for the provocations we came up with … And we were able to say, okay, we're going to put something in front of you – what's going to come back?"[13] These provocations included segments in which Sollfrank showed a close-up of her mouth or her silhouette for the duration of a Piazzetta segment – "anti-television", in other words, which contradicts the medium's tendency towards continuous action that usually characterises conventional programming.

Other contributions of Frauen und Technik were feminist in nature. In the *Penis Neid Spiele* (Penis Envy Games), which were later continued in their own show on Hamburg's Open Access Channel, they ridiculed a well-established television format, the game show. The callers were presented with three keywords from which they had to construct a story, which was then judged. Particularly successful stories were "rewarded" with an animation. The "Hallo-Gesänge" (Hello Chants), one of their first contributions, addressed the often dull and shallow dialogue of the audience at *Piazza virtuale*.

Janine Sack emphasised in our interview that it was also a matter of questioning the promise of interaction and participation, and that these broadcasts were on the one hand consciously designed for audience participation, but on the other hand there was "a very clear restriction of the audience": "We actually always played with the expectations of those on the other end of the phone, who had relatively little leeway … [We] experimented a lot with how narrowly or how broadly interaction could be defined. That is, we came up with settings to try out where interaction works and where it doesn't and what can be a desired interaction."

The ironic, feminist approach they had developed at *Piazza virtuale* was also characteristic of the group Innen, which Sollfrank, Nonnenmacher and Sack founded with other female artists after Frauen und Technik. Both Sack and Sollfrank assess their experiences with *Piazza virtuale* as predominantly positive. Cornelia Sollfrank, who as an artist still often works with media such as the internet and video, emphasises in our interview that the collective work was formative for her: "Old Boys Network, a cyber-feminist network,

13 All quotes from an interview with Cornelia Sollfrank and Janine Sack, 8 June 2018.

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came out of that. And now 25 years later I'm publishing a book about technofeminist practice in the 21st century. So that has been a theme that I totally stuck to." Janine Sack, who today works as an art director and is responsible for the redesign of the newspapers *tageszeitung* and *Freitag*, adds: "For me, artist groups were definitely the most important part of my education. And in this context, I also see Universcity TV and then my participation in *Piazza virtuale*." (*tb*)

A2.10 Köln

Organisers: Quantenpool Köln, Institut für Kommunikation, Köln, Art Service Association (ASA), Pyromania Arts Foundation, Ultimate Akademie, Kunstpiraten among others.
Participants: Bernd von den Brincken, Boris Nieslony, Stefan Römer, Hassan Dyck, Lisa Cieslik, Péter Farkas, Wolfgang Ziemer, Rolf Kirsch, Boris Hiesserer among others

Broadcast dates (selection):

22 June 1992, 11:45–11:55; 23 June 1992, 11:45–12:00
among others (all 3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Köln was organized by various individual artists and artist groups under the name Quantenpool Köln. It was initiated and coordinated by the Cologne-based artists Bernd von den Brincken and Boris Nieslony. Art historian and performance artist Stefan Römer was also part of the group and later wrote a chronicle of the events.[14]

Quantenpool Köln was housed in the Moltkerei Werkstatt in Cologne from 13 June to 30 September 1992. The Moltkerei Werkstatt is a non-commercial space for experimental art and performance that still exists today. Piazzetta Köln was aired over 50 times during *Piazza virtuale* and was thus one of the most frequently broadcast Piazzettas.

14 Interview with Stefan Römer, 6 August 2020.

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It received financial support from Hoppe-Ritter-Kunstförderung. Telekom set up an ISDN connection in the Moltkerei.[15] However, in a later, retrospective publication, Quantenpool Köln critically noted that Telekom charged them telephone fees, even though the company had originally promised not to, thus turning their "art sponsorship" into a source of revenue.[16]

The programming of Piazzetta Köln was extremely diverse. On the one hand, performances and media art productions were shown; on the other hand, political and social topics were discussed. A recurring series was *Islam and Art* with the Muslim cleric Hassan Dyck. As well as recitations of the Koran, explanations of customs and spirituality within Islam were presented, whereby individual callers attracted attention through trolling and Islamophobic statements.

In addition, the communication in the *Piazza virtuale* was critically examined in humorous performances. For example, a "Hallo counter" was introduced on 9 July: callers were asked to phone in just to say "Hallo" so that the count would be as high as possible. A performance entitled "It's a nightmare" by the Cologne conceptual artist Wolfgang Ziemer made such criticism even clearer on 18 July: Ziemer addressed the audience directly in English and accused them of one-sided, superficial communication that failed to recognise the great potential of the project as a whole. It was simply "a nightmare", whereupon he sank to the ground and did not move again until the end of the broadcast. Other artists involved in were Rolf Kirsch, Boris Hiesserer, Slobodanka Stupar, Ljiljana Jovanovic and Robert Reschkowski.

Due to changes in the show, the management in Kassel cancelled at short notice the planned broadcasts from Cologne between 8 and 11 September and between 14 and 20 September. The Cologne group later complained of "destructive behaviour" on the part of Van Gogh TV. However, this did not affect the closing celebrations in Cologne on 20 September.[17]

In addition to the televised programme, Quantenpool Köln also offered performances and discussion events on site almost daily. These ranged from musical performances and video art to dialogues between artists and visitors. One regular was performance artist Lisa Cieslik from Cologne, who addressed consumption and consumer behaviour in her work.

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15 See Institut für Kommunikation, *Quantenpool*, Köln: Vilter Verlag, 1993, p. 12.

16 Ibid., p. 4.

17 See ibid., p. 15.

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Boris Nieslony also initiated the accompanying project *The Virtual Diary* in collaboration with the Hungarian writer and publisher Péter Farkas. Approximately 50 artists from 12 nations participated by sending faxes with artworks. Individual artists were each given a period of two or three days in which to send contributions. The works were then exhibited in the Moltkerei workshop.[18] Through the participation of artists such as Milan Knížák, Endre Tot and Larry Miller, the project links directly to the "Eternal Network" of Fluxus and Mail Art. Other contributors to *The Virtual Dairy* included György Galántai, Robert Jelinek, Anne-Mie van Kerckhoven, Orlan, Rolf Sachsse and Katerina Koskina. However, the results were not seen on the show.[19]

Boris Nieslony still runs the artist network Art Service Association (ASA) and is active as both a performance artist and curator. In addition to his artistic career, Bernd von den Brincken works as a publicist and IT consultant, Stefan Römer as an artist and lecturer. (*tb/jw*)

A2.11 Ljubljana

Organisers: Egon March Institute (EMI)
Production unit in Ljubljana: Radio Student, KUD France Preseren (location), Kanal A (local TV station), produced by Marko Kosnik
Performers: Ema Kugler, Mojca Dimec, Mojca Kumerdej, Lidija Bernik, Franc Purg, Sebastjan Staric, Bojan Stokelj, Mare Kovacic, Silvo Zupancic, Marko Kosnik
Contact studio: Snezana Levstik, Jure Longyka
Local transmission: Peter Levart, Miran Divjak, Miran Kajin, Borut Savski
Intellectuals: Jelena Lovric, Silva Meznaric, Rade Serbedzija, Slavoj Zizek, Damjan Bojadziev, Gorazd Suhadolnik, Radko Polic, Goran Jankovic, Haris Burina, Rastko Mocnik, Petar Lukovic

18 See ibid., p. 41.

19 See Welch, Chuck (ed.), *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995; Wohlrab, Lutz, Mail Artists Index, https://mailartists.wordpress.com/

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Broadcast dates:

16 September 1992, 12:10–12:30 (3sat); 20 September 1992, 01:26–03:30

Description:

Piazzetta Ljubljana was organised by the media and performance artist Marko Košnik, who operates under the moniker Egon March Institute (EMI). Košnik was a founding member of the Slovenian band Laibach in the 1980s. Laibach in turn was part of the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art, NSK), which was formed in 1984. In cooperation with the student radio station Radio Študent (RŠ), the Piazzetta Ljubljana contributed two shows to *Piazza virtuale*. For this purpose, they used the premises of the local cultural centre KUD (KUD France Prešeren Arts and Culture Association). In addition to being broadcast on 3sat, the show was broadcast on the newly founded private television station Kanal A in Slovenia.

At that time, the armed conflict between the former states of Yugoslavia was at a peak. In the first broadcast on 16 September, intellectuals and artists from the country, which had disintegrated into individual republics, made short statements about the ongoing war. These were largely delivered in Slovenian by telephone, with short summaries in English in the modem chat in the lower half of the picture. The prominent philosopher Slavoj Žižek was on the phone and discussed his view of the religious and historical dimension of the conflict. The statements were accompanied by glimpses of on-site performances via the videophone.

In the second broadcast on 20 September, the journalist Petar Luković, who worked for the news magazine *Vrijem*, spoke by telephone from Belgrade. At that time, regular telephone calls between Ljubljana and Belgrade were not possible because of the war, and the callers had to be connected via the studio in Kassel. In a press release three days earlier, the Kassel broadcasting management pointed out the great significance of the show.

Contact with *Vrijeme* and Luković could be established beforehand thanks to the contacts of the prominent sociologist and political activist Rastko Močnik. Močnik also briefly commented on the war in the course of the second broadcast. Petar Luković described it as the "craziest and stupidest in history" and explained the anti-government attitude of many citizens in Serbia and the propaganda of the Serbian government. The German callers were encouraged to ask questions. Most of them were interested in

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the current crisis and asked about possible solutions. One caller complained about the refugees from Yugoslavia fleeing to Western Europe. (*jw*)

A2.12 Lyon

*Organisers:*René "Néné" Sanglard, Christian Vanderborght, École nationale des beaux-arts de Lyon
*Participants:*E. Barthomeuf, F. Cavaille, F. Coletti among others

Broadcast dates:

9 July 1992, 11:00–12:00; 9 September 1992, 11:00–11:20; 12:10–12:30; 16 September 1992, 11:15–11:30 (all 3sat)

Description:

As part of his far-reaching artistic activities, Mike Hentz was a member of the Lyon-based artist group Frigo in the 1980s. The artists René "Néné" Sanglard and Christian Vanderborght, who were also involved in the group and were responsible for the Piazzetta Paris, organised an additional Piazzetta at the art academy in their home town, the École nationale des beaux-arts de Lyon. The group also received support and sponsorship from France Telecom Lyon, the telecommunications company TDF and the regional authority for cultural promotion of Drac Rhône-Alpes.

In the first broadcast on 9 July 1992, paintings of young women supposedly from Lyon were inserted at the beginning. The audience was supposed to ask questions and write to the art school if they were interested in dating them. As with other French-language Piazzettas, there were considerable communication problems on the part of the German callers, although a participant in Lyon occasionally translated announcements into German. Later on, a painter was shown whose work of art was to be commented on. However, there was no response. Finally, an auction of virtual objects was held, to be paid for in imaginary money, not unlike the NFT (non-fungible token) sales of today. Bids could be made to buy imaginary things, such as an uninhabited island. The show concluded with an interactive music performance and a dance performance. The audience was asked to provide the

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rhythm by making sounds on the telephone or to instruct the dancer in front of the videophone.

The 9 September show began with a Japanese Butoh dance. Callers could control the camera in Lyon and the facial expressions of the performers. From Kassel, Salvatore Vanasco translated the commands. Piazzetta Lyon did a final show with the Piazzetta in Nagoya, Japan, on 16 September, where they tried to count in as many different languages as possible. For this purpose, people of different origins stood in front of the camera in Lyon and counted from zero to ten in various languages. (*jw*)

A2.13 Macworld Berlin

Organisers: Apple Inc., Eric Gersh, Karel Dudesek
Participants: Karel Dudesek, Axel Roselius, Dorit Schmidt-Purrmann among others

Broadcast dates (selection):

2 September 1992, 11:30–11:50; 3 September 1992, 11:45–12:00; 3 September 1992, 12:10–12:30; 4 September 1992, 11:45–12:00; 4 September 1992, 12:10–12:30; 5 September 1992, 11:35–11:55

Description:

Between 2 and 5 September 1992, the computer manufacturer Apple held the Macworld in Berlin. In cooperation with Apple staffer Eric Gersh, Van Gogh TV took the opportunity to design a stand for the fair. The organisers were aware of the pioneering character of the television experiment and were happy to participate in *Piazza virtuale*. Gersh, who had visited the Kassel studio in person shortly before, contacted Van Gogh TV in a fax dated 14 July 1992 to clarify organisational questions as well as to praise their work: "Your experiment with real-time interactive television is truly groundbreaking. I am happy for the opportunity to have Macworld Expo Berlin associated with it. … Macworld visitors will be able to access the Piazza through picture phone telephone, modem and fax from the Piazzetta at Macworld Expo Berlin."

The visitors in the exhibition hall mainly used the opportunity to greet their relatives and friends via the videophone. Karel Dudesek acted as a host in most of the broadcasts. Two programmes took place in conjunction with

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Piazzetta Paris, whose coordinator and presenter Christian Vanderborght was tele-present. The latter exchanged views with the contributors on camera in Berlin about new interactive applications of computers, but there was rarely any conversation with the German callers. The 4 September edition offered a humorous performance. Karel Dudesek presented the 3sat viewers with a fictitious gas-powered Macintosh computer from Apple called "MacGas".

On 5 September, *Piazza virtuale*'s Axel Rosselius hosted. He chatted with a musician named Stefan, who was a guest in person and about whom no further details were given; he also talked to the callers about interactive media applications in the arts, especially in music production. (*jw*)

A2.14 Milan

Organisers: Decoder Collective
Participants: Sabine Reiff, Gomma (Giacomo Verde), Fabio Malagnini (Studio Entropia), Graphics and interactive music: M. Canali and R. Sinigaglia, Music: Sigma Tibet, HELS, Funky Trouble

Broadcast dates:

27 June 1992, 01:30–02:30, 28 June 1992, 01:30–02:10 (3sat)

Description:

The Italian hacker and media art collective Decoder, which also published a cyberpunk magazine of the same name from 1987, organised an interactive art and music festival at the Squat cultural centre in Milan in June 1992 and did two broadcasts on *Piazza virtuale* during the course of it. The event was sponsored with hardware by the computer manufacturer Commodore. There was a live performance by techno duo Sigma Tibet.

The first broadcast was introduced by a telephone conversation between members of Van Gogh TV. In Kassel, Salvatore Vanasco sat in the studio and welcomed Mike Hentz, who had travelled to Milan. There, the audience was immediately drawn into the conversation in order to establish a connection with the German callers, who were encouraged to speak English. In addition to exchanging small talk, the premises in Italy and the Decoder collective were introduced via videophone.

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During the second broadcast, pictures of a party were transmitted from the Squat. The telephone receiver with the connection to Kassel was passed around again, but this time it remained with a rapper most of the time. The latter kept asking for electronic beats, which Van Gogh TV willingly played. However, his chanting in Italian was increasingly lost in the babble of voices of the German callers. (*jw*)

A2.15 Moscow

Organisers: Art Technology Institute Moscow
Participants: Kirill Preobraschenski, Olga Lwowna Swiblowa, Leonid Bajanov, Tatjana Didenko, Sergej Shutov among others

Broadcast dates:

11 September 1992, 11:03–11:33; 18 September 1992, 11:03–11:30; 19 September 1992, 11:03–11:30

Description:

Piazzetta Moscow was coordinated and moderated by Russian media artist Kirill Preobrazhensky. It was sponsored by the Moscow International Art Fair (MIF) and the Stolichny Bank, one of the first private banks in the country. The three broadcast dates were each dedicated to an aspect of art or the international art market. In preparation for the broadcast, Van Gogh TV member Mike Hentz had travelled to Moscow at the end of April 1992 to support the participants in the Piazzetta and to hold talks with sponsors.[20] He had met Preobrazhensky two years earlier at the Summerfestival in Amsterdam and through him had established connections to the art scene in the then Soviet Union. Before Piazza virtuale Kirill Preobraschenski had been a cameraman for Hotel Pompino.

The preparations for Piazzetta Moscow were difficult. For example, there was no possibility of accessing a satellite via official television channels or government agencies for the purpose of transmission, as Kirill Preobra-

20 Interview with Kathy Rae Huffman, 18 June 2018.

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schenski explained in our interview.[21] Many artists were sceptical about the project because of its experimental character. Only after a long search was a company found to provide the necessary hardware and infrastructure for satellite transmissions. Due to the great technical effort and lengthy preparations, the original plan to have a regular broadcast slot for the entire duration of the *Piazza virtuale* had to be abandoned. As a result, only three broadcasts from Moscow took place in the last two weeks of *Piazza virtuale*.[22]

The first broadcast on 11 September had to be shortened due to problems with the satellite transmission. In the Kassel studio, no video signal could be received from Russia for two-thirds of the airtime, and at times there was no sound signal either. A discussion about "art and money" with the callers of *Piazza virtuale* was announced. It was only in the last 10 minutes of the 30-minute programme that the transmission worked. However, a planned performance on the theme of "Money and Food" did take place: the artists in Moscow covered a slice of bread with petroleum and Russian banknotes in front of the camera. This was intended to draw critical attention to the disparity in wealth between Eastern and Western Europe.

The second issue was dedicated to the topic "Money and Power". The discussion focused on the art market in Russia and Germany. For this purpose, two artists of Russian origin working in Germany were connected by telephone, and local artists were guests in the Moscow studio. In Kassel, Mike Hentz acted as host. A translator can be seen in the upper right half of the picture, speaking English, German and Russian. In an interactive performance, the moderators in Moscow asked the German callers for help in finding a man called "Rudolf Schneider". A person with this name was finally located by a caller in Oldenburg.

In the third broadcast, the difficult situation for artists in Russia was explained and discussed with callers. Under the title "Pocket Art", the participants in Moscow and Kassel were asked in a concluding performance to show the contents of their pockets.

In retrospect, Kirill Preobraschenski emphasised the euphoric mood during the production of *Piazza virtuale* and the possibility of working with new media. As a video artist, he participated in exhibitions in Milan, Prague and St Petersburg and took part in documenta 12 in 2007. The filmmaker and

21 Interview with Kirill Preobraschenski, 10 July 2019.

22 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

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artist Olga Lvovna Sviblova, who also participated in Piazzetta Moscow, is a director and curator, founded the House of Photography in Moscow and directs the Multimedia Art Museum there today. (*jw*)

A2.16 Nagoya

Organisers: Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK – Japan Broadcasting Corporation)
Participants: Eiichi Kubota (Programme Director NHK), Atsushi Ogata (Translator in Kassel) among others

Broadcast dates:

16 September 1992, 11:15–11:30; 17 September 1992, 11:00–12:30 (3sat)

Description:

Japanese public broadcaster NHK did two Piazzettas towards the end of the project in September 1992. NHK's programme director at the time, Eiichi Kubota, was the producer of the show. Curator Kathy Rae Huffman, who worked with Van Gogh TV, held preliminary talks with Kubota in Tokyo in February 1992. He was very interested in working with her from the start, but asked Van Gogh TV for details of the technical implementation. In March of that year, Van Gogh TV sent him a video cassette with a technical demonstration of the project.

An ISDN videophone, fax, modem and conventional telephones were located in the entrance hall of the NHK broadcasting centre in Nagoya. The location was also referred to as the "basilica" in the programme. On 16 September, the first broadcast took place in cooperation with the Piazzetta in Lyon. The concept was to count in as many languages as possible. In addition to short conversations between the callers and the respective participants on the spot, the count to ten was done again and again in different languages.

The following day, on 17 September, the main broadcast of Piazzetta Nagoya took place. Instead of the usual time slot, the Japanese Piazzetta was on air for the entire broadcast on that day. The transmission of the videophone from Nagoya was almost continuously visible on the screen. For *Atelier* and *Classical Orchestra*, the usual monochrome backgrounds were replaced by these images. The text inserts and panels of the programme were in Japanese

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or subtitled. The Japanese filmmaker and video artist Atsushi Ogata acted as translator in Kassel. He primarily mediated for the Japanese audience. The German callers were encouraged to speak in English, which Ogata translated.

One segment from Nagoya called *Basilica* showed Vincent van Gogh's famous self-portrait from 1889 as a computer graphic. However, individual parts of the face, such as eyebrows, nose and mouth, were missing, which served as the basis for an interactive game. These body parts were moved by commands from the callers to their correct location. In *Coffeehouse*, the German callers exchanged views with the Japanese participants about their respective experiences with *Piazza virtuale*. The Japanese callers praised the concept of the interactive television experiment, but also wished for improvements in view of the sometimes chaotic circumstances.

Van Gogh TV went to Tokyo in 1993 at the invitation of NHK to create an interactive television programme in the style of the *Piazza virtuale* for three days as part of the show *Sim TV*. (*jw*)

A2.17 Paris

Organisers/Group/Initiative: Christian Vanderborght (Coordinator)
Participants: Frank Barte (Technical Director), Karim Baupin, Arnaud Mayet, Jacques Bigot among others

Broadcast dates (selection):

9 August 1992, 12:05–12:30; 11 August 1992, 12:00–12:15; 15 August 1992, 12:00–12:27; 18 August 1992, 12:00–12:15 (3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Paris was coordinated by media and performance artist Christian Vanderborght. It took place at the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie, a large science museum located to the north of the Parc de la Villette. With over 30 broadcast dates, occasionally together with other Piazzettas, it was the most active international Piazzetta. Vanderborght was already involved in Minus Delta t projects in the 1980s. Thanks to his contact with Jacques Bigot, an employee of the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie, the museum was persuaded to become a partner. Bigot, in a memo to the museum management, empha-

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sised the possibility of trying out new media technologies, and eventually got the project off the ground.[23]

Broadcasting started at the beginning of August 1992. Each show had a different presenter, including Christian Vanderborght on the video phone, who talked in English to the mainly German callers about the weather and the general state of affairs. In this early phase, the visit of Van Gogh TV member Mike Hentz, who was a guest in Paris on 8 August and took part in the conversation live on camera, and at times acted as sole moderator, stands out.

From the broadcast of 11 August onwards, however, Piazzetta Paris started to broadcast performances and moderated discussions. First, callers were asked to tell their favourite joke in English. For many German callers, however, the language was a hurdle. In the next show, the audience was asked to direct three performers in front of the videophone in Paris to perform contortions with their bodies, which was announced as "body humour".

The broadcast on 13 August was dedicated to the memory of the composer John Cage, who had died the day before. A Dada-like musical performance was staged in his honour using electronically generated loops. During the two following shows, a head was partially shaved. The segment *Late night music and drinks* was just that: four men sat together smoking and drinking, playing more or less harmoniously on a keyboard and occasionally singing French children's songs.

The following broadcasting block, which started on 19 August and was conceived as a series, seems like a caesura. The audience was invited to discuss political and social topics, especially the significance of the Western world at this time. Conversations about the weather as well as the use of the word "Hallo" were now explicitly forbidden. For the most part the image was divided into a split screen. In addition to the host in a smaller window at the bottom right, a larger window in the middle alternately displayed catchwords to be discussed on colourful backgrounds. The terms were, for example, "drugs?", "alcohol?", "east?", "aids?" or "politics?" There were short, lively discussions, for example about the war in the former Yugoslavia or protection against AIDS.

The next broadcasts were again more artistic in nature, with media art and found-footage material by the artist group Ars Technica. Among these was a video loop of a rotating head that referred to the work *Anthro/Socio (Rinde Facing Camera)* (1991), which the American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman

23 Interview with Jacques Bigot, 9 May 2019.

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presented at documenta. For two broadcasts, the TV screen was shared with Piazzetta Köln, which contributed performances, some with musical instruments, as well as media art and sculptures.

In a final series of shows with a set subject matter called "L'amour de l'art de l'amour de …" (The love of art for the love of art for the …), there were to be "conversations about art and media", especially about the interactive television work of Van Gogh TV. As a result of stricter moderation, this discussion did take place, albeit mostly about the fundamental meaning and nature of art. On 12 September the topic was body art and cosmetic surgery. To the accompaniment of superimposed images of such procedures, callers discussed their attitudes to cosmetic surgery and tattoos.

The last show was organised in conjunction with the Piazzettas of Lyon, Macworld and Geneva. The joint programme seems surprisingly topical from today's perspective, because it was about the future of the European Union. The Geneva host was supposed to discuss asylum policy and fundamental human rights issues in particular, but the callers scarcely participated.

One last appearance by Christian Vanderborght was again rather Dadaist. As a sign of the emerging digital age, he called for communication exclusively in binary code, i.e. using only the English words "zero" and "one". He himself seemed to combine the two words rather arbitrarily, without using actual words translated into binary code. The callers and Salvatore Vanasco, who was connected from the Kassel studio, enjoyed the idea and happily threw in the two words in a random order. (*jw*)

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A2.18 Poitiers

Organisers: Jean-Louis le Tacon (coordinator), Sylvie Marchand (coordinator and moderator) Bernard de Litardière (Coordinator), École régionale des beaux-arts de Poitiers (today: Les Beaux-arts, Ecole d'arts plastiques de Poitiers)
Participants: Sebastian Gass, Eric Corvez, Guillaume Grimonprez, Marion Valiere among others

Broadcast dates (selection):

27 July 1992, 12:00–12:15; 28 July 1992, 09:25–09:40; 29 July 1992, 12:00–12:15; 30 July1992, 09:10–09:30 (3sat)

Description:

The Piazzetta in Poitiers was organised by students from École régionale des beaux-arts de Poitiers, led by French experimental filmmaker and video artist Jean-Louis le Tacon. He had been co-founder of the Département Images Composites (Department for Image Composition). The group was sponsored by France Telecom, the information technology company Teleport de Poitiers and the science and technology centre Espace Mendès France.

The three subsequent broadcasts had the motto "Painting the countries of the callers". The host was film maker and artist Sylvie Marchand. She spoke in English with the participants on the phone about their homeland, while an artist on site painted the country of origin of the caller in a colour the caller had requested.

A fax from the Kassel broadcasting management dated 13 August 1992 shows that further broadcast dates for Piazzetta Poitiers were planned for 9 and 16 September. Why these were not realised is not known. Marchand later pursued a career as a film maker and media artist and earned a doctorate in ethnology. Today she runs the multimedia company Gigacircus in France. (*jw*)

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A2.19 Prague

Organisers/Group/Initiative: Michael Bielicky
at the Academy of Fine Arts, Prague
Participants: Tomas Masin, David Saudek, David Christoff,
Keiko Sei, Ika Kroeger among others

Broadcast dates:

17 July 1992, 02:00–02:15; 18 July 1992, 02:00–02:30; 24 July 1992, 02:00–02:30; 04:45–05:15 (feed to Coffeehouse), 25 July 1992, 02:15–02:45; 2 August 1992, 03:14–03:45; 8 August 1992, 01:25–01:45; 16 September 1992, 12:10–12:30; 18 September 1992, 11:35–11:50 (3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Prague was organised by the German-Czech media artist Michael Bielicky, who came to Germany from the ČSSR in 1969 at the age of 15. Bielicky studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy from 1984 to 1990 and was a master's student of Nam June Paik from 1987 to 1990, then his assistant until 1991. His video tapes and sculptures from this period show the influence of the Korean video art pioneer. He first met the members of Van Gogh TV at the European Media Art Festival in Osnabrück in 1987. In 1991 he became a professor at the Prague Academy of Arts, where he taught until 2006, and established a department for new media there.

In 1992, Bielicky had a small studio at his disposal at the Academy, equipped with a video mixer, an Amiga 3000 computer and several video recorders and cameras. The surviving correspondence with Prague repeatedly discusses different methods of sending video to Kassel; among other things, a satellite uplink and an ISDN connection are considered. In the end, however, the studio in Prague went on air with a Panasonic videophone that could only transmit still images in black and white.

In a memo from April 1992, Kathy Rae Huffman gives a positive assessment of the situation in Prague, both of the technical equipment and of Michael Bielicky's work. The Piazzetta Prague "will involve the leading members of the young artist generation in CZ, Pirate Radio people, philosophers and writers", the memo reads. The participation of the Prague cultural scene had been expressly required by Van Gogh TV, and the fact that this largely

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Piazetta Prague with David Saudek, Tomas Mašín, unknown, David Filip Christov, Dr.Peter Rezek and Michael Bielicky

failed to materialise led to conflicts between the group and Bielicky in the course of the collaboration.[24]

In preparation, Kathy Rae Huffman visited Prague on 9 May, and on 27 and 28 May Mike Hentz presented the project at a press conference there and conducted "interactive training". Also present at the press conference was the action artist and musician Milan Knížák, who had been the director of the Prague Academy of Arts since 1990. Knížák had become internationally known as a member of the Fluxus group. He supported the project and arranged for a budget of 30,000 crowns from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture; the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) contributed a further DM3000.

A small group of Bielicky's collaborators, friends and acquaintances went on air seven times from the Art Academy between 17 July and 8 August. This included Tomas Masin and David Saudek, Bielicky's two assistants, as well as the Australian David Christoff, whom Kathy Rae Huffman describes in a travel report of 11 August as "CZ/Australian young man is active in computer circles, and in the Prague avant garde". In another broadcast, Czech philosopher Petr Rezek offers a "philosophical advice hotline" where people could call and ask philosophical questions. In one broadcast, the Japanese curator

24 Interview with Kathy Rae Huffman, 18 June 2018.

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and activist Keiko Sei is in the studio, but she is introduced as a Vietnamese theorist named Yvette Min. Games with assumed and actual identity, with facts and fiction and with the possibility of deception in the media play a recurring role at the Prague Piazzetta. In one show, pictures of little penguin figurines on plastic foil are presented as a live broadcast from Antarctica, in another broadcast toy figures are claimed to be in Central Park in New York.

Piazza virtuale was broadcast at night on the OK3 channel from 6 July 1992 in the Czech Republic; it had been founded in the aftermath of the "Velvet Revolution" in 1990 as the third state television channel. In our interview, Bielicky recalls the thrilling experience of working on the Piazza:

> I can still remember how we sat there, excited. We were shaking. We also drank a lot of alcohol to get us down. It was a crazy experience and crazy excitement. Everyone's pulse was pretty high. We were all in a kind of semi-trance. You weren't aware of all the consequences, you were suddenly in the middle of it. Suddenly you were broadcasting, suddenly you heard your voice. It was almost like a drug. And you didn't reflect much. You just did it.[25]

At the beginning of August, however, the Piazzetta came to an end. The art academy was renovated during the vacation, the professors had to vacate their studios, and Bielicky was not interested in continuing under these conditions. During a visit by Kathy Rae Huffman, an open conflict arose with Bielicky, who did not want the Piazzetta to continue at another location in Prague. Kathy Rae Huffman looked for other interested parties, and there are several faxes to the possible organisers of a "Piazzetta Prag Radost" (Radost is a district of Prague), but they did not lead to any success. However, on the mornings of 16 and 18 September, 3sat broadcast another Piazzetta Prague organised by the Czech artist Ika Kroeger at Café Rock. Another broadcast announced for 18 September 1992 did not take place.

Michael Bielicky, who is now a professor at Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Karlsruhe and has created an extensive body of video installations, emphasises that his experience with *Piazza virtuale* influenced his artistic work. In his 1995 tele-performance *Exodus*, he used a satellite phone to broadcast video in real time from the Negev Desert in Israel and then documented his journey on a website. (*tb*/*jw*)

25 Interview with Michael Bielicky, 25 June 2018.

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A2.20 Riga

Participants: Valdis Martinsons, Liena and Edgars Muceniers, Ojars Petersons, Aigars Sparans, Hardijs Ledins and others

Broadcast dates (selection):

11 July 1992; 1:50; 21–30 August 1992 (every morning on 3sat, broadcast length between 20 and 60 minutes); 29 August 1992, 1:15–1:30; 2:30–2:45; 3:15–3:30; 4:00–4:15 (all on 3sat)

Description:

Among the Eastern European Piazzettas, Piazzetta Riga was the one that hosted the most shows. The main organiser was the Latvian artist Baiba Ripa, who had met Mike Hentz during a trip through the Eastern Bloc countries. Together with a group of friends, Ripa organised the Piazzetta in her home town. In addition to Mike Hentz and Minus Delta t, Baipa Ripa also had contacts in Germany's techno scene, including the Low Spirit label of the Berlin techno DJ Westbam. Documents and correspondence show that Mike Hentz was particularly committed to this Piazzetta; he arranged for a group from

Piazzetta Riga
Photo: Janis Deinarts

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Baiba Ripa organized the Pizzetta in Riga
Photo: Janis Deinarts

Latvia to visit Kassel and was also personally involved in carrying out the broadcasts on site. On 22 August, Piazzetta Riga broadcast for one and a half hours; no other Piazzetta was given so much airtime.

The content of the Piazzetta was strongly influenced by the fact that Latvia had declared its independence from the Soviet Union a year earlier and a long suppressed Latvian nationalism re-emerged. The Russians and the presence of Soviet troops in Latvia were subjects of whole shows and the topic came up again and again in the street interviews organised by Piazzetta Riga. The economic difficulties faced by the country at the time were also addressed.

The technical infrastructure and telephone network were still very underdeveloped compared to most Western European countries. Therefore, most broadcasts could only be transmitted by videophone and with the slow-scan method, which could only manage still images in black and white. It was not until 22 August that moving pictures were sent to Kassel via satellite; the transmission was sponsored by Finnish Telekom. During the broadcast, the Latvian artist Indulis Bilzens, who lived in Germany and had previously worked on other Van Gogh TV projects, translated questions from German callers from Kassel.

On one occasion, the Piazzetta in Riga broadcast together with the one in Bremen, as Bremen was Riga's partner city and there were also personal connections through Latvian exchange students at the Bremen Art Academy.

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On 24, 25 and 31 June, the Latvian group broadcast from a music festival in the coastal town of Jurmala, and on 8 and 9 August from a festival in Liepāja.

From 21 to 30 August, regular programmes of between 20 minutes and an hour were broadcast on weekend mornings at around 11:20. Riga is also represented in the show with shorter segments on weekend nights. The programmes were broadcast from various locations: from downtown Riga, including Independence Square, Cathedral Square and the square in front of the Parliament, where interviews were conducted with politicians and passers-by, from the discotheque Club 21 and from Gallery A. These shows each had their own themes, which often had an official air and were repeatedly attended by government representatives. Subjects included the relationship between Germany and Latvia. In this segment, the German ambassador Hagen von der Wenge Graf Lambsdorf made an appearance. Other topics were the minorities in Latvia, the continuing Russian presence in the country, medical care, the media and the telecommunications system in Latvia.

One show included street theatre and painting by Latvian artists and a performance by sculptor Ojars Petersons. In the last programme, travel tips for Latvia were given. Many Latvian interviewees tried to use the international broadcast to draw attention to their situation, ask for help from abroad, offer their services and invite people to travel to "a small country in Europe". The shows on telecommunications systems or tourism often cross the line into surreptitious advertising.

Within the team in Kassel, there was also criticism of the somewhat official character of these shows, where even the state-run trade company Interlatvia had its own segment. Mike Hentz, however, praises the Piazzetta Riga precisely for the fact that the organisers had made a real effort to include in the broadcasts not only the art scene, but people from all walks of life. In his opinion, the Piazzetta Riga had come closest to the concept of recreating a public piazza in the media: "Riga was for me [...] actually the most interesting cross-section of society."[26]

Piazza virtuale was so popular in Riga that a newly founded private station subsequently gave itself the name Piazza TV and continued the concept of call-in programmes. Baiba Ripa was later able to study in Germany through Mike Hentz and also took part in the Universcity network that Ponton set up. (*tb*)

26 Interview with Mike Hentz, 22 February 2019.

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A2.21 Sant' Arcangelo

Organisers: Santarcangelo dei teatri d'Europa
Participants: Andrea Succi, Gomma (Giacomo Verde) among others

Broadcast date:

12 July 1992, 02:30–03:00 (3sat)

Description:

The Piazzetta in Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna took place during a theatre festival in the city. It was organised by Giacomo Verde, who was also in charge of the Milan Piazzetta. The subject of the show was "Geld und Leben" (Money and life), although the concept remained rather obscure. Thus, in addition to isolated shots of the participants, slips of paper with handwritten questions such as "Do you love money?" or "Money or life?" were shown.

At the beginning of the programme, only Italian was spoken by those present in the Kassel studio, because of the "Italian night" taking place there, but that led to vehement complaints from the German callers. This resulted in a brief, interesting discussion about the fundamental nature of interactive television programming. For example, one caller, who welcomed the project, demanded that there should be more moderation and clearer structures. It was only towards the end that the discussion turned to the meaning of money for the individual callers.

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A2.22 Stuttgart

Name/Place: Stuttgart
Organisers: Discotheque "Das unbekannte Tier"
(The Unknown Animal)
and bar "Palast der Republik"
(Palace of the Republic) in Stuttgart
Participants: Jan von Krogh, Thomas Labusch among others

Broadcast date:

29 August 1992, 02:00–02:30 (3sat)

Description:

The Piazzetta Stuttgart was organized by the local club Das unbekannte Tier and bar Palast der Republik. The main organisers were Jan von Krogh, who was responsible for the technical planning, and Thomas Labusch, who ran the two bars. They had many ideas for the show, which were ultimately not realised. A multimedia production of the absurd play *Sonata for Three Gentlemen* by Jean Tardieu, an interactive talk show via modem and fax as well as a large closing fireworks display were discussed.

The group originally wanted to do four shows, but in the end only one was broadcast. On 29 August, at 2 a.m., they broadcast from Das unbekannte Tier and made creative use of the location. A good-humoured presenter moved through the premises, interviewing discotheque-goers and bouncers. He also made himself available to the callers of *Piazza virtuale* as an "interactive guinea pig" by complying with their requests as long as they did not get out of hand.

The Piazzetta Stuttgart show was marked by technical problems. During the broadcast, Piazzetta Hamburg (Women and Technology) was also on air. Karel Dudesek, who was connected acoustically from the broadcasting centre in Kassel by telephone, directed audience questions to bouncers and clubbers. (*tb*)

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A2.23 Vilnius

Organisers: East Lithuanian Television
Participants: Valdis Martinsons, Ieva Kausinyte among others

Broadcast dates:

31 August 1992, 11:03–11:10; 1 September 1992, 11:03–11:23; 2 September 1992, 11:03–02:00 (3sat)

Description:

The Vilnius Piazzetta was one of the Eastern European Piazzettas that Mike Hentz organised in a travel marathon lasting several months through various countries of the former Eastern Bloc. It was produced by East Lithuanian Television with support from the newly founded telecommunications company Lintel.

The first broadcast of Piazzetta Vilnius could not take place as planned because the sound signal was not received in Kassel. Instead, still images with views of the Lithuanian capital were shown via the videophone. Meanwhile, Karel Dudesek explained the geographical location of the Baltic States to the audience and chatted with the callers. A boy on the line temporarily took over the moderation with glee.

The second show started with a conversation with the German callers, then a German-speaking participant from Lithuania enthusiastically promoted the upcoming theatre festival in Vilnius and emphasised the spirit of optimism in the country. A concluding broadcast followed the same formula. Both the director of the newly founded Academy of Religion in Vilnius and employees of the two private radio stations, Radiocentras and M 1, each presented their institutions. Afterwards, they exchanged views with the audience on the telephone. (*jw*)

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A2.24 Zurich

Organisers: Universcity TV Zurich / F+ F School for Experimental Design (today: F + F School of Art and Design)
Participants: Hans Wermelinger, Wim Kolb, Borna Cisar, Costa Vece, Stefan Halter, Christian Ledermann, Ursula Palla, Daniel Hertli among others

Broadcast dates (selection):

4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 16, 23 August 1992 (3sat)

Description:

Piazzetta Zurich broadcast almost 20 times at *Piazza virtuale* between 2 and 23 August. The group was one of those that took the possibility of interaction with the audience particularly seriously and developed four different show concepts that focused on audience participation. Some of these concepts almost have the character of parlour games and were well received by the audience. However, viewers often tried to take these ideas to extremes that were not planned for by the Zurich group.

The group was initiated by Swiss art student Hans Wermelinger, who had met Mike Hentz during his studies and had also taken part in a Universcity TV workshop in Hamburg.[27] Van Gogh TV was very interested in having Piazzettas in Switzerland, because 3sat could be received in more than 60 per cent of Swiss households.

In an undated report about a visit in spring 1992, Kathy Rae Huffman praises the many initiatives and points of contact in Zurich. However, the organisers, who were in contact with Van Gogh TV at the time, stopped working on the project, so Mike Hentz turned at short notice to Hans Wermelinger, who organised the Piazzetta with friends and fellow students. He was able to secure a small financial grant from the Federal Office of Culture and chose the artist space Atelierhaus, which served as studio. The space was located near the Zurich train station on Hohlstrasse. In the announcements and during the broadcasts, the audience was repeatedly invited to visit the studio.

Not only did the group have video cameras and computers, but they were even given their own ISDN connection for the broadcast, although this tech-

27 Interview with Hans Wermelinger, 7 April 2020.

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Piazetta Zurich: Hans Wermelinger, unknown, Wim Kolb, Borna Cisar, Christian Ledermann, Pia Sigrist, Ruedi Fleischmann, Delio Chiavi, Ursula Palla, Monika Fleischmann, Daniel Hertli, Christoph Geiser (from left)

nology had not even been officially introduced in Switzerland at that time. Van Gogh TV provided the group with an ISDN videophone from sponsor Telekom for the transmission. The picture quality of the transmission in colour is therefore better than that of some of the other Piazzettas. There was also a specific telephone number for Swiss callers. The German callers sometimes made fun of the Swiss ("You want a Ricola?"); sometimes there are misunderstandings or protests when the conversation slips into Swiss German.

While initially only five broadcasts were planned, Piazzetta Zurich went on air regularly and much more often in August. Obviously, the various teams (for which separate "project leaders" are even named in a description

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of the different shows) put a lot of effort into developing ideas that corresponded to the interactive nature of *Piazza virtuale*. In a letter from Hans Wermelinger, there is even talk of "scripts".

One of these was *Do It Yourself*, where the audience could give instructions to the performers in front of the camera. Billed as a "Public Virtual Landscape", the description says: "Before your eyes, living spaces are transformed, world maps are cut up into the individual countries and reassembled. World history is restaged in accordance with the meetings of famous figures." The actual broadcast was more modest: for example, the Zurich performers had set up a table with Lego, toy cars and figures, which they moved back and forth following requests from the audience. The callers joyfully participated, there is hardly any of the usual personal conversation. Some callers try to push the scenarios to the limit and to break the given rules when, for example, one caller suggests knocking over the table on which the toys are set up. Similar processes can also be observed in the opening performance by Stefan Waier, who let himself be guided by the audience and was asked, among other things, to jump off a table.

Blick aus dem Fenster (View from the window) was another show cooked up by the Zurich Piazzetta. Here the callers are asked to describe what they see outside their windows – explicit reference is made in the description and also in the introduction to the parallels with the "windows" into which the screen is divided on *Piazza virtuale*. Studio guests describe what they see from the studio window that alternates with reports by the callers, some of whom give such detailed information about their place of residence that, with a little local knowledge, one could probably find them.

Two shows encourage the viewers to direct the camera: In *Rotkäppchen-Spiel* (Little Red Riding Hood Game) they are supposed to search the studio for the fairy tale character; in *Videokurier* (Video Delivery Service) they are supposed to search the studio for clues to a murder case. In some cases, a convincing detective-style cooperation develops between the callers, who speculate about possible hiding places or the meaning of their finds. The intensity of the audience interaction has a lot to do with the appearance and personality of the respective hosts, some of whom have a real knack for motivating their viewers.

Apart from these segments, each of which was aired almost daily for a week, there were also completely unscripted broadcasts, some of which provide a meta-commentary on *Piazza virtuale*. For the show on 16 August, for

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example, the Zurich group recreated the studio in Kassel and pretended to be the broadcasting management before showing an ironic "Best of" selection: "The best yawn", "The best general education" etc. In the last show on 23 August, the host tries to motivate the audience to discuss democracy and the media, to which some of the callers respond. (*tb*)

A2.25 Unrealised Piazzettas

A number planned Piazzettas were ultimately not realised. For example, the group had planned a show with the Computer Museum in Boston, and was in contact with a staff member there, Brian Wallace. In August 1992, this was announced in a press release as the "North American Piazzetta". It went on to say that "the computer museum in Boston [will] intervene with interactive texts and pictures of museum visitors". However, this show did not happen.

A similar live broadcast from the USA did indeed take place, but was not televised. This was a demonstration of the idea and the technology of *Piazza virtuale* at the SIGGRAPH (Special Interest Group on Graphics and Interactive Techniques) conference held in Chicago between 27 and 31 July 1992. Van Gogh TV member Benjamin Heidersberger and other staffers were connected from the container studio in Kassel on 29 July and presented various shows, including the *Robotcamera* and *Coffeehouse* to the audience at SIGGRAPH in a demonstration lasting just under an hour. However, the original plans to send staff to Chicago and host an interactive programme with visitors to the conference as a Piazzetta on television was abandoned.

Mike Hentz spent months travelling in the various countries of the former Eastern Bloc to find interested parties to organise Piazzettas. While he was successful in Moscow, Riga, Vilnius and Prague, his contacts in St Petersburg and Warsaw did not bear fruit. Despite intensive efforts, especially in Poland, in the end no one could be found who was willing to take on the work of organising a Piazzetta. (*tb*/*jw*)

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Ponton staffer Torsten Tapper soldering
Photo: altschaffel.com

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Appendix 3 Technology

The Van Gogh TV staff developed a number of devices and technologies for *Piazza virtuale*, but also for the group's other projects. For *Piazza virtuale*, the control of programme elements via telephones using the multi-frequency method, which was new for this purpose at the time, was certainly the most important innovation. This was only possible because virtually all picture, video and sound elements were stored digitally on hard disks – at a time when German television was still working almost exclusively with analogue signals on magnetic tapes. At *Piazza virtuale*, on the other hand, every show was a multimedia application.

The previous Van Gogh TV project *Hotel Pompino* (1990) was already technically extraordinarily innovative and was broadcast from one of the first virtual studios in Europe, which the technicians of Van Gogh TV had developed for the most part with then commercially available consumer equipment, not with expensive professional studio technology. Another innovation was the integration of a computer chat in programmes like *Coffeehouse*, which had also been used in *Hotel Pompino* and in its predecessor project *RePublic TV* (1989).

Apart from the television broadcast on 3sat, Van Gogh TV broadcast *Piazza virtuale* every evening for three hours via the Olympus satellite. This programme could only be seen by people the group called "Schüsselschwenker" (dish slewers) – people who specifically searched the range of international television satellites using their private satellite dishes and came across the nightly broadcast of the show by chance. These viewers were among the show's most loyal followers. Not only did they call in regularly, but they also contacted each other and travelled to Kassel to be present during the production of the show.

The broadcasting of programmes from the Piazzettas in other cities using the slow-scan TV method and via ISDN was also a method that was not used in traditional television but *Piazza virtuale* could not have taken place

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in the planned form without this technology. The so-called access points allowed people in Kassel to participate in the broadcasts.

New technologies were also created for other Van Gogh TV projects. For a telephone chat world, the necessary programmes were written by the group around 1990. The company Ponton European Media Lab in Hanover, which developed out of Van Gogh TV, created a video card called AVIS in 1994. For the project *Service area i.a.*, which took place at Ars Electronica in 1994 and was again broadcast on 3sat, Ponton developed a 3D computer communication environment in which users could enter a virtual space on the internet by means of avatars. The most important of these methods will be explained in greater detail below.

A3.1 Computer-controlled automated programming

One of the technical aims of *Piazza virtuale* was that the show should run automatically and without the intervention of the producers. Each broadcast show was a separate computer program that had to be loaded at the beginning – hence there is a sequence before each new segment in which the audience was asked to wait: "Our computers are loading now." Since the group worked for the most part with commercially available computers, the interaction of the various computers from different manufacturers, which generated different image elements and sounds and into which live video images were also superimposed depending on the show, required specific software developments. These self-written programs, but also the software of the computers, occasionally crashed during the broadcast, which led to failures with boot screens or blackouts.

The task of the staff was to ensure smooth technical running and to make sure that the callers did not use the channel for extremist political statements or other undesirable messages. In other programmes, the dialogue was often also moderated or animated by the Van Gogh TV staff, even though this contradicted the concept of having the audience create all of the content of the show by themselves.

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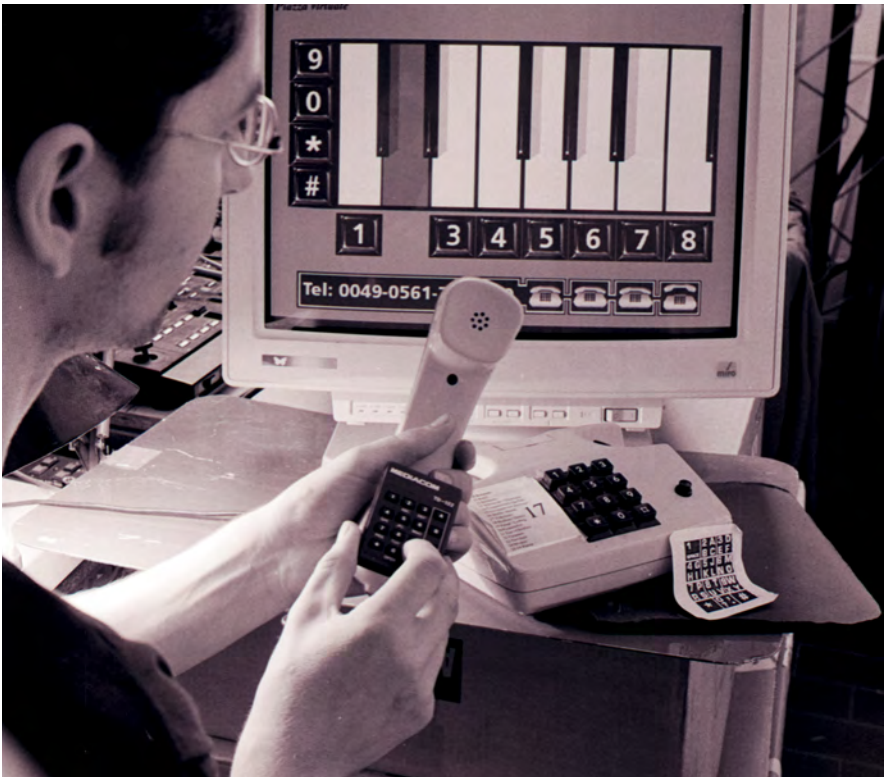

Ponton staffer Christian Wolff uses a beeper to control an early music program
Photo. altschaffel.com

Composer Julian Boyd in the music studio in Kassel
Photo. altschaffel.com

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A3.2 Touch-tone control

One of the most important innovations in *Piazza virtuale* was the idea of controlling programme elements using the telephone keypad. This became possible because touch-tone or multi-frequency dialling was introduced in analogue telephony in Germany from the beginning of the 1990s. With multi-frequency dialling, the keystroke signals of a telephone are converted into audio frequencies that could be further processed by computers. The idea came to Benjamin Heidersberger as early as 1990, as excerpts from his sketchbook show. Together with the staff of Van Gogh TV, he developed a telephone interface with his own software that controlled different program elements.

The first controllable module was the game Tic Tac Toe developed by Rainer Koloc, but it was not included in Piazza virtuale. In Atelier, the audience could use a simple drawing program to paint together, and in Rap 'em High (Disco Fever) and Interactive Classic Orchestra they could trigger samples to make music together. The robot camera in the studio was also controlled using the telephone keyboard. In the segment Sarah and Daniel, short video clips were triggered with the help of the telephone keypad, in tazetta you could navigate through news from the newspaper taz using the telephone keypad, and voice messages could be recorded in Record Stack.

This method of controlling events on television can ultimately be traced back to the 1960s German TV show *Der Goldene Schuss* (The Golden Shot), in which a caller could aim an air rifle at a target, a concept that was used to play computer games in the show *Telespiele* (Telegames) with host Thomas Gottschalk in the late 1970s. At the time when *Piazza virtuale* was on air it was even possible to control virtual characters on the TV shows *ZDF-Glückstelefon* and *Superball* (Sat1), even if only by spoken commands. Interaction possibilities were also offered by shows in which the audience could take part in the decision-making process via TED, and by Teletext, in which you could navigate through text panels by remote control. But it was not until *Piazza virtuale* that the telephone became an input medium for programme sequences on the monitor. This principle was used shortly afterwards on the *Hugo Show* (from 1994) on Kabelkanal, where you could control a character in a video game via the telephone.

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A3.3 Slow-scan TV and ISDN videophones

Most of the Piazzettas sent their shows to Kassel by videophone. This circumvented the costly satellite transmission that traditional television used for international live broadcasts – a clever trick that was made possible by the fact that ISDN, which was new at the time, allowed large amounts of digital data to be transmitted. Piazzettas that did not have access to ISDN connections used videophones which could send individual images over analogue telephone lines using the slow-scan TV process.

Slow-scan TV signals can also be broadcast via shortwave frequencies and were originally used during space missions in the 1960s and 1970s to send images from space to Earth. As early as the late 1970s, artists such as Bill Bartlett, Sharon Grace, Carl Loeffler, Liza Bear, Robin Winters, Paul Wong and Robert Adrian X worked with this low-tech medium. For the artists, it was a substitute for access to professional video transmission technologies; its aesthetics, especially the slow, line-by-line construction of the individual images, were readily addressed in their artistic experiments with the medium.

However, it was already possible at that time for videophones to "stream" moving pictures when they were connected to the ISDN network. This was done, for example, by Piazzetta Hamburg and Piazzetta Göttingen. Piazzettas Cologne and Zurich even had an ISDN connection installed specifically to be able to use these videophones. For slow-scan transmission, Van Gogh TV used a newly launched device. The Panasonic WG-R2 picture telephone was not yet available in Europe and seems to have been on the market only briefly. American curator Kathy Rae Huffman brought about a dozen sets from the USA to Kassel, which were lent to the various Piazzettas. This loan was acknowledged with loan slips; at the end of the project, the devices had to be returned. According to a list of equipment for the insurance company, the device cost DM550.

Those who connected the devices to an analogue telephone network could transmit individual images. The technology was similar to slow-scan TV except for some minor technical details. Slow-scan TV (SSTV) can transmit several black-and-white pictures in one minute. Similar to the fax technology, the images were decoded into frequency pulses, which were encoded again as an image line by line by the receiving device. The Panasonic WG-R2 videophone was used, for example, for the broadcasts of the Piazzettas in Riga, Prague and Ljubliana.

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Slow-scan TV signals can also be broadcast via shortwave and were originally used during space missions in the 1960s and 1970s to send images from space and the lunar surface to Earth. As early as the late 1970s, artists such as Bill Bartlett, Sharon Grace, Carl Loeffler, Liza Bear, Robin Winters, Paul Wong and Robert Adrian X worked with this low-tech medium. For the artists, this was a substitute for access to professional video transmission technologies; its aesthetics, especially the slow, line-by-line construction of the individual images, were readily addressed in their artistic experiments with the medium.

With other videophones from that time, however, it was already possible to "stream" moving pictures when they were connected to the ISDN network. This was done, for example, by Piazzetta Hamburg and Piazzetta Göttingen. Piazzetta Cologne and Piazzetta Zurich even had an ISDN connection installed specifically to be able to use these videophones.

A3.4 Transmission via satellite

In addition to the daily broadcast by the public service channel 3sat, Van Gogh TV broadcast a show every night from 9 p.m. to midnight on the Olympus television and communications satellite. This could only be received by people with a satellite dish who lived in the coverage area, which included large parts of Europe.

Olympus was an experimental television and communications satellite of the European Space Agency (ESA) designed to test new applications such as teleconferencing, high-definition television and data transmission. Olympus, which had been transported into space by the Ariane launcher in 1989, initially carried out its experiments successfully, but was soon plagued by technical defects. In January 1991, there were problems with one of the two solar generators. In May 1991, ESA lost control of the satellite, but was able to save it and it resumed service on 13 August 1991. In August 1993, contact was lost again, possibly because a meteor shower had damaged the satellite. When contact was restored, it was manoeuvred into a graveyard orbit and switched off. The satellite use was sponsored by ESA; Telekom had provided Van Gogh TV with a six-metre satellite dish as an uplink.

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A3.5 Computer chat on television

Before the internet became accessible to larger user groups in the mid-1990s, mailboxes were a method of connecting with others using a computer. To do this, you dialled into mailbox computers, which were usually operated by private individuals, from your own PC using a modem via the telephone network and could then upload and download data via remote data transmission (RDT), exchange emails or chat with the other users of the mailbox.

Computer chat had made its debut on Van Gogh TV's *RePublic TV* (1989) and was also used on *Ballroom TV* (1991). At *Piazza virtuale*, chat was one of the methods to participate in the show. For this purpose, they had installed their own mailbox in Kassel, which also ran outside broadcasting hours. Users chatted during *Coffeehouse* and other shows in a chat window that could be seen in the lower part of the screen. Some users were regularly seen in the chat; one particularly regular participant was a "Bootsy". However, since users could choose their own online pseudonym, it is also possible that the name "Bootsy" represented several users. It would then be a predecessor of the multiple avatars, such as at QAnon.

A3.6 Fax on television

One of the ways to get involved in the *Piazza virtuale* programme was to send faxes to a telephone number, which were then received by a NeXT computer at *Coffeehouse* and displayed in a window on the screen. This option was often used by viewers to make contact. Many simply sent their own fax numbers and asked for faxes. Others sent their own pictures, caricatures and photo montages. Some of the faxes would be called "spam" today – i.e. unsolicited advertising for companies. The technology was also used for a political campaign. Fans of the GDR youth station DT-64, which at the time was threatened with losing its frequency, regularly sent faxes to campaign for the preservation of the popular station – an early example of media activism in Germany that anticipated the political online campaigns of groups like Anonymous.

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Documenta visitors at the Access Point
Photo: altschaffel.com

A3.7 Access Points

In Kassel, the so-called Access Points – a video camera, a microphone and a monitor built into a console – were located next to the Fridericianum between the studio containers. The design for the construction came from Van Gogh TV staff and was built by a company in Kassel. Passers-by and exhibition visitors could take part in the show, which they could follow simultaneously on the monitor and intervene via microphone and the built-in video camera. The recordings of the Access Points were usually one of several images that could be seen simultaneously on the screen.

A3.8 Computer program for natural language processing

Medialandscape was based on a computer program for natural language processing, which was to enable linguistic interaction between humans and computers. Influenced by Marvin Minsky's book *Society of Mind* (1986), Salvatore Vanasco worked on the broadcast

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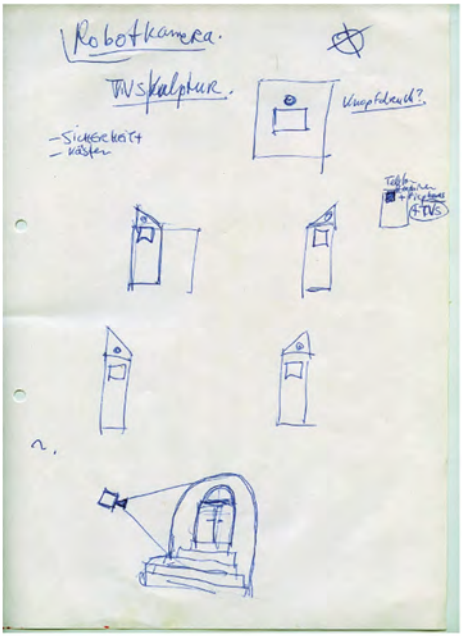

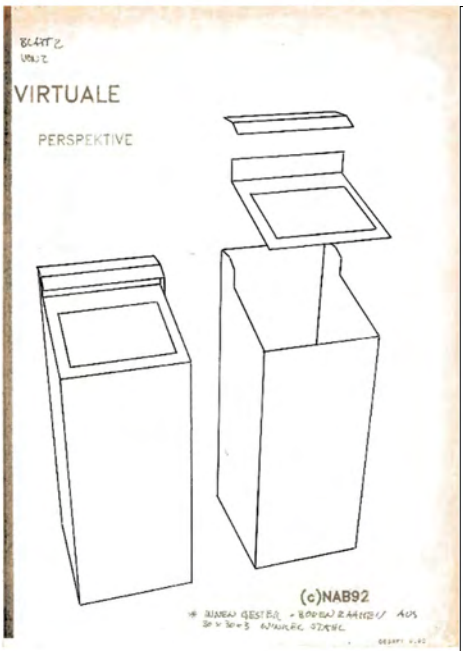

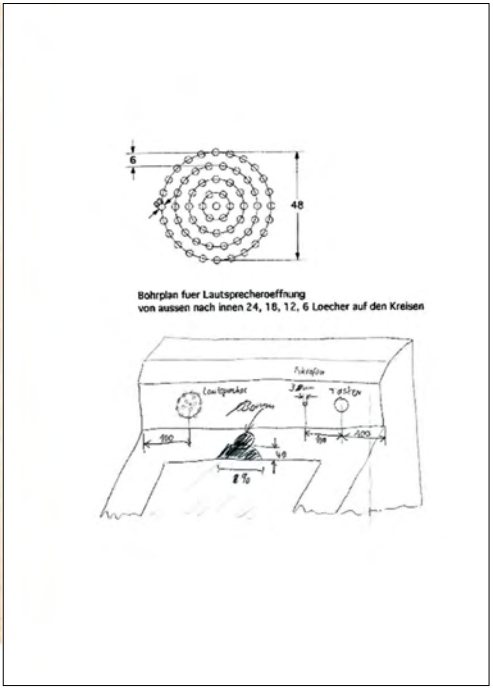

Two early sketches for the Access Point (top) and the final construction plan

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module together with the artist and programmer Wolfgang Werner. Wolfgang Werner developed an object-oriented database that matched keywords and search strings with a selection of media content.

Joseph Weizenbaum's famous computer program *Eliza* had simulated a dialogue between human and computer where the software produced responses using keywords from the sentences that the users typed in. In *Medialandscape*, keywords from the chat in the mailbox and from the calls triggered short sound, video or animation sequences as a reaction. The material for this came mainly from films and TV series; but there were also computer animation sequences designed by Van Gogh TV staff. The idea was to create a dialogue between people and the surrounding "media landscape", which consisted of video sequences, animations, images and sounds – for Vanasco, the "communication became image-generating and space-creating" when certain keywords in the computer chats triggered videos and sounds.

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the members of Van Gogh TV for their support: Without Benjamin Heidersberger this research project would not have happened at all. He as well as Mike Hentz, Karel Dudesek and Salvatore Vanasco always made themselves available for questions and generously provided me with material from their private archives.

My colleagues Jens Schroeter and Christoph Ernst from the University of Bonn were great research partners in our research projec. We have to thank Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for their generous financial support. Thanks also go to my colleagues from the Institut für Mediengestaltung (IMG) at Hochschule Mainz: Anja Stöffler, Hartmut Jahn, Olaf Hirschberg and Paulo Ferreira-Lopes, who supported me during the application process, as well as Sabine Hartel-Schenk from our research department, who was of great help when we wrote the funding application.

A very special "Thank you" goes to my Mainz project collaborators: student assistant Lisa Langemann, who, while watching countless hours of video material, discovered the Piazza virtuale fan club, Frithjof Heinrich for excellent camera work, and my research associate Julian Weinert, who I could rely on for more than three years in a variety of functions – author of essays as well as cameraman, web designer as well as conference host – who always supported me in this huge project and who never lost his sense of humour.

I also need to thank everyone who we interviewed for this project: Nicolas Baginsky, Wolfgang Bergmann, Michael Bielický, Jacques Bigot, Kathrin Brinkmann, Klaus Peter Dencker, Lothar Fritsch, Ulrike Gabriel, Ronald Gonko, Hermann Josef Hack, Kathy Rae Huffman, Thomas Kaulmann, Christiane Klappert, Marko Košnik, Geert Lovink, Kirill Preobraschenski, Stefan Römer, Baiba Ripa, Janine Sack, Holger Schulze, Pit Schultz, Cornelia

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Sollfrank, Gerfried Stocker, Rosa von Suess, Manuel Tessloff, Peter Weibel, Hans Wermelinger and Christian Wolff.

Finally I'd like to thank Christina Radner and Michaela Wimplinger (Ars Electronica), Brigitta Coers und Alexander Zeisberg (documenta Archiv), Peter Farkas, Nils Loof, Nora Sternfeld, Alfred Rother, Wulf Herzogenrath, Wolfgang Ernst and Hannah Glauner.

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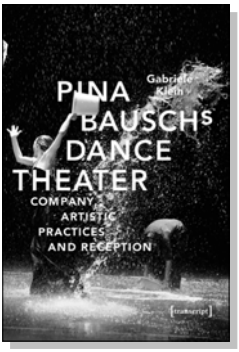

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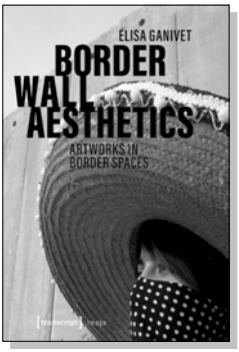

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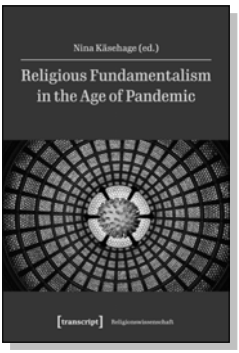

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