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PIAZZA VIRTUALE

The First Live Interactive Television Program

Piazza Virtuale - the first live interactive television program that is completely based upon the activities of the viewers.

Direct involvement in the program from their homes, via telephone.

The television screen is the user-interface.

The viewers are participating in an on-going public artwork.

WHY TELEVISION?

Van Gogh TV is working on an art-form of the future: Interactive television.

A decision was made in the mid-eighties – filtered through experiences with performance art, avant-garde music and many years of residency outside European cultural circles – to further develop the traditional arts within the electronic mass media. Art thus became research; became experimental; expeditionary; adventurous. Van Gogh Radio (present at the Documenta 8/1987, etc.) was followed by Van Gogh TV and the regular participation at the Ars Electronica - for example with "Hotel Pompino" in 1990.

THE PIAZZA

The Piazza, the town-square, was designed to be the centre of urban life. People met – to talk and chat; to play music and games; to barter and sell...

It is the exchange, the dialogue which lends the public-square its life, colour and resonance.

Yet the spirit of most urban public-squares nowadays has been extinguished. An open and public life doesn't exist there anymore.

TELEVISION AS PUBLIC SPACE

"We don't need public spaces anymore, because now we have television", says the architect Robert Venturi. Television as public space?

The *Piazza Virtuale* is based upon the idea of making television into a public piazza, in which the communication process is transmitted via the electronic network onto the screen of the domestic television. Everybody can tune in from their home – television as dialogue.

TELEVISION AND TELEPHONE

Only television allows an immediate access to images and sound which millions of people can directly watch, and to which people from many places can respond simultaneously.

To make this response available to as many people as possible, the access is available via the telephone – the world's most broadly used mass media instrument (over 700 million connected worldwide).

Interactive television which is based on a two-way, or group dialogue, will replace the one-sided information blizzard which television still remains today:

Images from other lands, films, sporting events, live reports from wars – everything is blasted at the viewer and makes him "responsible" for that which he "knows" via the television medium: yet a sense-giving reaction remains impossible.

Interactive television opens a dialogue, with the viewer as starting point: Out of the boob-tube is made a public forum.

THE VIEWER DESIGNS THE PROGRAM

Piazza Virtuale is not "normal" interactive television, of the kind being propagated more and more by commercial interests. In such visions, the viewer is only a more critical consumer of evermore specialised goods and information offerings, but has no influence on the program itself. As an *artistic* attempt at interactive television, the *Piazza Virtuale* invites the viewers to make and design the program themselves.

PIAZZA VIRTUALE – HOW DOES IT WORK?

Specifically for the *Piazza Virtuale*, a new computer-controlled television interface was designed in which text, still-images, video, computer animation, sound and music can simultaneously appear and in which one can connect – directly from the home.

In contrast to the computer, television traditionally allows limited activity by the user beyond clicking on a remote-control device. The absence of a feedback channel is not due to the medium itself, but rather the result of a 40-year long dominant media-policy which denies the viewer a participation in television and which also hinders the routine experience of television as it actually is.

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HOW DOES ONE ENTER THE PIAZZA VIRTUALE?

The easiest method is simply to dial in with the telephone. In some program blocks, for example in the Coffeehouse or during the Piazzetta shows, there is the possibility to join the program and to converse along with other "voicers", modem-users or participants from public-entry terminals. If the viewer has a computer modem, he can send text live onto the television screen. Likewise, with a fax machine. The most variations and applications are available with a simple telephone-set, insofar as that the telephone has a touchtone-dialing system. An answering machine's remote access device functions as well. Using the keys the viewers can play different instruments in the "Interactive Orchestra" or test their talents in digital painting in the "Virtual Studio".

Via picture-phone as well, one can enter directly into the *Piazza Virtuale*: both black & white/still-image phones and the newer ISDN phones which allow up to 20 colour images per second and the simultaneous sending and reception of images. The new ISDN phones are a medium indicating the future of two-way communication, of interactivity.

WHAT HAPPENED IN KASSEL?

During the Documenta 1992, *Piazza Virtuale* was on the air daily for one hundred days live via 3sat, the Olympus-Satellite and on FAB Berlin. Tens of thousands participated live: They conversed, wrote, painted, composed music, made contacts and threaded together a self-generating artwork.

Live connections from and to many countries of western and eastern Europe, the USA and Japan made a worldwide on-screen dialogue possible.

AT THE MEDIALE

During the Mediale, the *Piazza Virtuale* will concentrate more upon regional aspects. The transmission within the Hamburg cable system reflects the establishment of public access points within the state of Hamburg.

SPECIFIC GROUPS DEVELOP THEMSELVES

Individual social, political and ethnic groups can develop and present themselves within the *Piazza Virtuale*.

A mass medium like television must also learn to offer special programming for

specific target groups, instead of a tasteless blend aimed at the lowest common denominator.

The *Piazza Virtuale* aims to provide more quality than it does quantity. The active participation of many is more important than the passivity of most.

THE NETWORK AS ARTWORK

At the Ponton European Media Art Lab one sees, within the philosophy of a transmission facility, a degree of artistic freedom preserved which traditional artists have with the paintbrush, their paint and their canvas. The involvement of the public is recognized not as a limitation but as a way to discover new possibilities which are not available to an artistic individual working in isolation. The work process is continually collective in nature, and therefore there is no particular "style". In the implementation of interface-design, the artistic merit is not the primary criterion, but rather the comprehension of the interactive process for the viewer/participant is foremost.

EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

The aesthetics of the *Piazza Virtuale* are not the hyper-realism which dominate the mass media and the creations of computer-graphic artists more and more. Van Gogh TV consciously renounces a virtuose artistic self-presentation in favour of a presentation of simplicity, normalcy and human imperfection which contrasts with the theatrical reality of usual television fare. The attention is focused primarily upon the stream of communication, and neither smoothly designed nor finished products of "communication experts" are wished.

This results in another kind of program drama, which disappoints the usual expectations: The narrative structure, the logic of entertainment is negated and replaced with an open and meandering flow of happenings - or perhaps nothing happening.

In this way one follows through phases of relatively little activity into regions where many callers - via voice, modem and picture-phone - are simultaneously connected and very much is happening. This experience leads to an individual's awareness of how quickly the normal sensory processing reaches its limits. One who has trouble keeping up with the events and happenings within the *Piazza Virtuale* should recognize how incapable he is to absorb the manic video-clip pace of some TV stations.