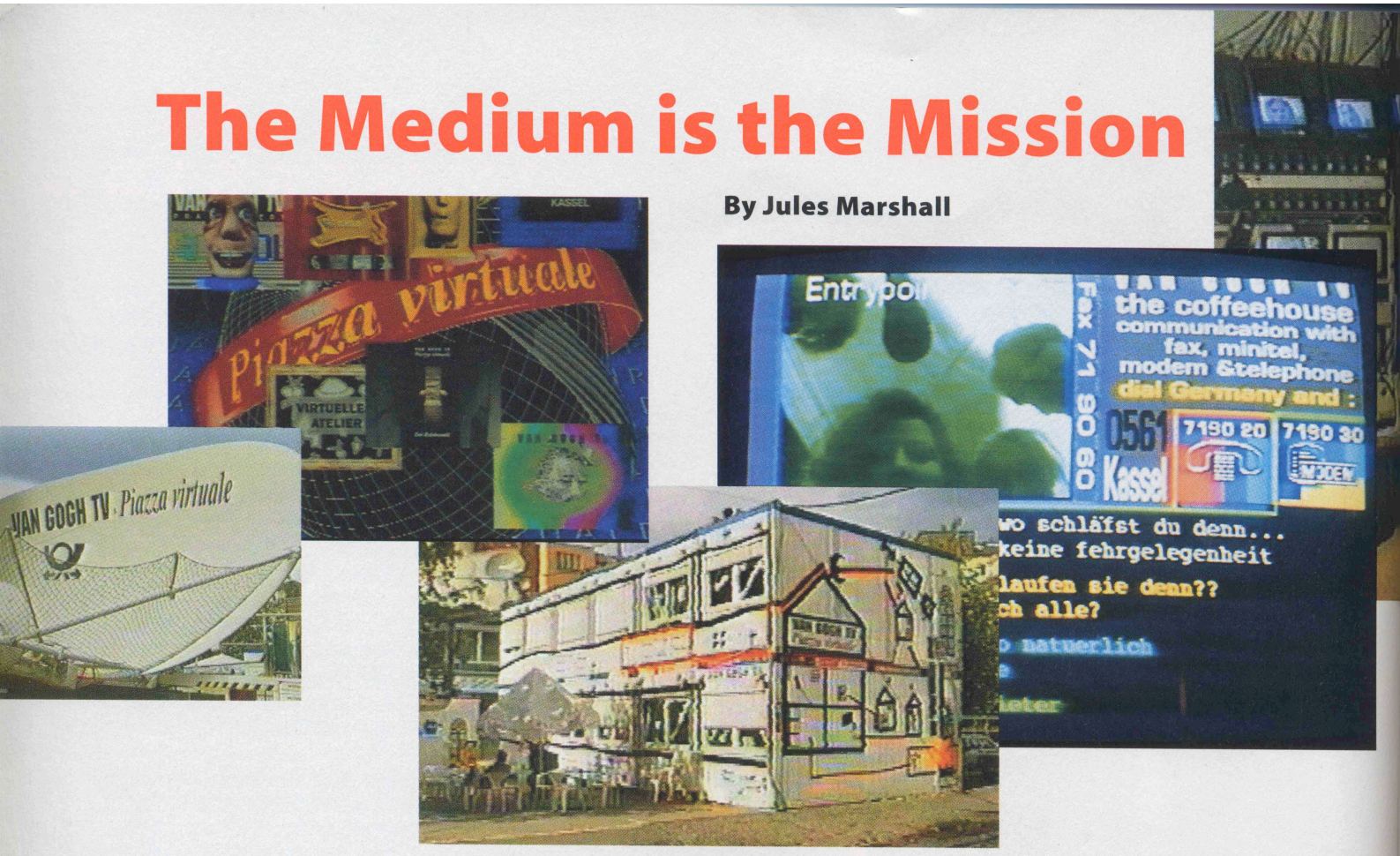
The Medium is the Mission

By Jules Marshall



It was one of the largest interactive television experiments ever. For 100 days, anyone with a telephone and a television could take part. Yet it was aggressively non-commercial and has spawned worldwide attention. Jules Marshall reports from Hamburg on the media revolutionaries who are creating an escape from the "pornography of information."

Great leaps in technology usually require the springboard of great dreams; breaking free of entrenched ways demands a vision that transcends the tradition of re-doing what's been done before. So what do you *dream* about when you hear the words "interactive television?" Video on demand? Home shopping? Better information services and never having to get out of your pajamas again?

Or do you close your eyes and imagine driving a stake through the sclerotic heart of that 50-year-old bloodsucker, television?

Do you see new collaborative art forms, new political and social organization, the creation of a genuine 'communicopia?' The people of Ponton European Media Art Lab do. From its studio headquarters in Hamburg's hooker-haunted St. Georg district, Ponton last summer produced Piazza Virtuale, a most ambitious and radical experiment in interactive television that involved 750 hours of live broadcast across Europe and occasionally, around the world.

A production of Van Gogh TV (Ponton's television production unit), Piazza Virtuale was broadcast over ZDF, the German equivalent of the BBC, from a cluster of temporary container buildings erected in a town square in Kassel, Germany during the Documenta IX art fair last summer. For 100 days, anyone with a telephone and a TV within broadcast range could take part in a free-wheeling, radically interactive experience. The programming so stunned the broadcasting world that Japan's NHK recently commissioned Ponton to do a three-day version of Piazza in Tokyo (they logged so many calls that the Japanese switches temporarily failed), and Atlanta's Cultural Olympiad is considering a global version of the program to be aired concurrently with the1996 Summer Olympic Games.

In Ponton's original Piazza, there were no rules, no instructions; just a bunch of technicians and specially programmed computers that did you reached by phone. "At first, people were a bit confused and it was a bit chaotic," admits technical director Benjamin Heidersberger. Up to twenty people could simultaneously use touch-tone phones to air their voices on current events (the neo-fascist riots in Rostock, Germany provided a controversial and heated topic of conversation), arrange meetings, make music with a computer-mediated "virtual orchestra,"

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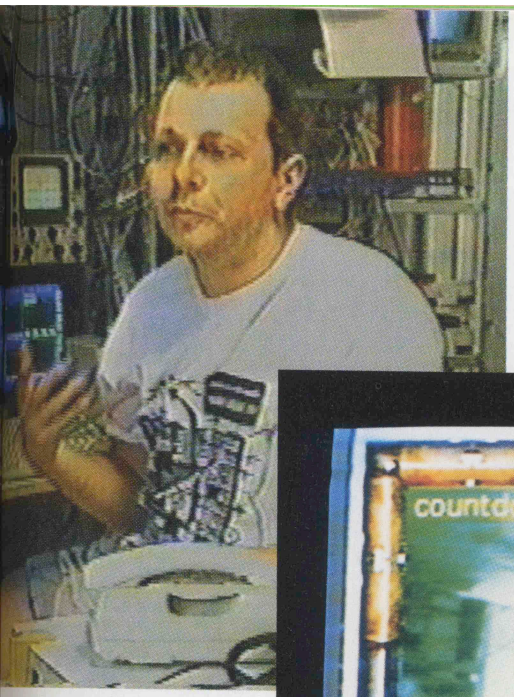

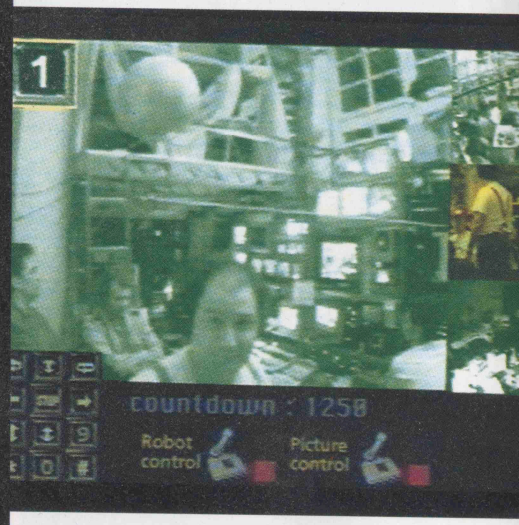

Banks of computers and modems in Ponton's container-city studios created an instant, televised BBS. Modem users squirted text onto the television screen and faxes were displayed on camera; there were QuickTime movies, animations, and even ISDN connections. Piazza Virtuale also included picture-phone entry points from around the globe. At left: Benjamin Heidersberger, technical director.

"paint" using Mac-like programs, or simply rant and rave at each other.

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Despite the lack of advertising or advance publicity, around 5,000 people phoned in the first day. Within Piazza's first fifteen minutes on the air, Van Gogh TV faced its first case of abusive racism. A censor button was rapidly rigged up, but even this fix was quickly turned into a creative feature by callers who attempted to probe how far they could go without being kicked off.

The next day, 100,000 people called, and the lines remained consistently busy for the rest of the summer, at the end of which some 130,000 callers had gotten on the air, putting about US$1 million in connect charges into the coffers of Deutsche Telekom (DT), the German telephone company.

Many callers, says Heidersberger, were "post-Nintendo kids, bored with game culture and hanging out in amusement halls." In the virtual space of Piazza, they could get their heads into what McLuhan dubbed 30 years ago "the participation mystique."

There were no journalists, talking heads, or moderators. Besides the BBS, viewers could control a camera inside Van Gogh TV's studios (hanging from a robot mounted on tracks on the studio ceiling) by punching their touch-tone telephone pads, which appeared on-screen as navigational consoles. The wandering camera became an extension of the viewer's eye, able to chase and interrogate the broadcast technicians and artists as they stepped gingerly through the thicket of equipment. And it was all live, broadcast on two satellites.

The evolutionary nature of the event allowed rapid design modifications such as clearer, more self-explanatory icons, and a computer interface that enabled deaf people to access the system. There were problems, of course, like when the Kassel phone exchange shunted thousands of incoming calls to an unsuspecting home.

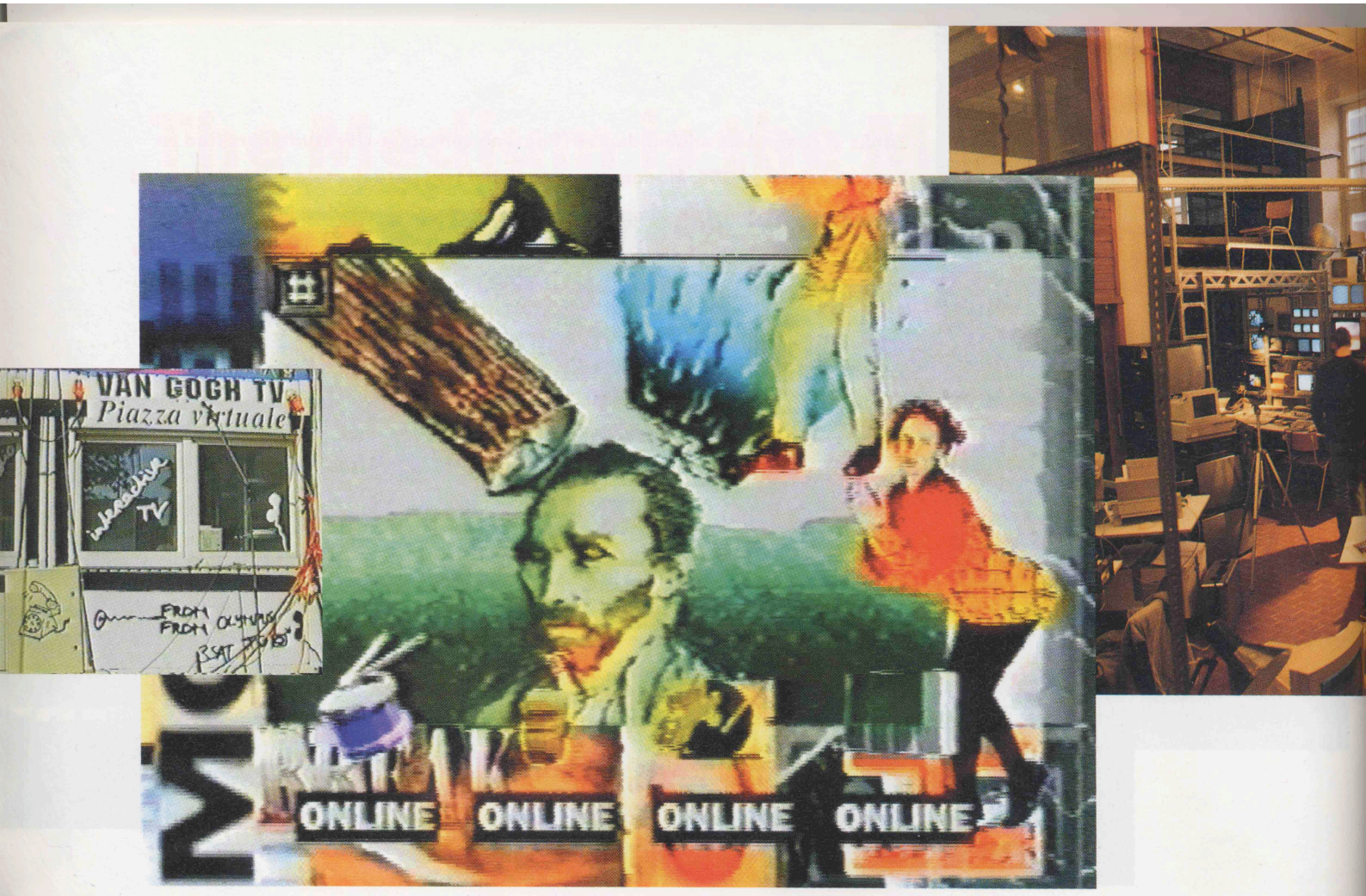
The Medium is the Mission

Established in 1986, Ponton's organization is horizontal to the point of anarchy: There's no boss and job descriptions are vague; conflicts are resolved by "shouting, fighting, and running around screaming." No one has a contract, and though pay is in the "needs" rather than "wants" ball park, when the cable companies came head-hunting at Ponton, no one considered leaving, even for offers of tenfold salary increases.

The key word at Ponton is "multicultural." Each of the fifteen-member core speaks three to four languages and works with the same number of computer languages. They are hardware hackers (including the vice-pres of Hamburg's infamous Chaos Computer Club), musicians, artists, technicians, and production coordinators; they hail from Germany, Italy, France, Austria, Canada, and the US.

The idea for Piazza came together in 1988, and grew from the assumption that the human-machine-human relationship was the central relationship in Western culture – and that it was changing. The first Van Gogh TV project – Hotel Pompino, a five-day live transmission of 3-D rooms inhabited byactors and linked to the public by sound and text – was transmitted a year later on ZDF.

Ponton is attached to no institution, commercial or public. Its funding is a mix of public, private, and corporate donations,



"The artist has a duty to society. You're born, you're educated, you live in a community, and you have responsibility. The world behind the screen is a world that needs designing. We are taking responsibility for that design and not just leaving it up to the companies."

which ensures a freedom to work that its members believe is unique. The DM2.5 million funding for Piazza came from the Austrian Government, the city of Hamburg, Electronic Data Systems, and DT. Apple and others donated equipment; ZDF donated 350 hours of satellite time.

"There is no political, philosophical, or economic power behind us," says Salvatore Vanasco, Ponton's soft-spoken co-director. "We're just artists. You never hear the Polydors, Warners, and EMIs we are competing with use the word 'art' in connection with interactive TV."

"It's a hard way to survive, but you can control it," says Karel Dudesek, a huge bear of an Austro-Czech, and a former bookbinder, performance artist, avant-garde industrial musician, now a director of Ponton. "This is the positive side of not selling something. Piazza was not forcing anyone to have fun, to consume or relax. It was an escape from the pornography of information."

When they have money, they do a project. When they don't, they plan the next one.

"We asked ourselves what multimedia means as a word rather than a product," says Ole Lütjens, interface designer and former cartoonist. "We agreed the aim of Piazza Virtuale should be to use mass media tools and basic equipment that anyone can use immediately – not after reading ten manuals."

"We had no intention of dealing with information, post-production, or reality TV," says Dudesek. "Our major goal was live interaction; to break through the barrier of the screen; to downgrade TV from a master medium into just one window onto a space" – hence piazza, Italian for town square.

A European View of Things

In a broader sense, Piazza incorporates nebulous cultural associations of public space that go beyond the mall and the freeway. "If you walk in a city in the US, what you see is a general lack of common responsibility," says Heidersberger. "The streets are cracked and everything looks shitty outside the private home. In Europe, there is some collective understanding of what society needs: a meeting point, a place where people can exchange views – were life can happen. This is strongest in Mediterranean culture: a piazza is where you go to drink your coffee, to talk politics, to flirt, and to play."

This aspect of common responsibility is welded to the German concept of *Bildende Kunst* (fine art). "The artist has a duty to soci-

"TV is too linked to power and systems of control," says Karel Dudesek (above). "We have more and more free time, but what are we using it for? Piazza was about saying 'Here, if you use this, things can be different, your life can be enriched and enriching to others.'"

ety," says Ole. "You're born, you're educated, and live in a community and you have responsibility." In Ponton's case, this responsibility is to the electronic community struggling to be born. "The world behind the screen needs designing. We are taking responsibility for that design and not just leaving it up to the companies," says Benjamin.

"TV is too linked to power and systems of control," says Dudesek. "We have more and more free time, but what are we using it for? Do we want to keep everyone at home simply watching and consuming? Piazza was about saying 'Here, if you use this, things can be different, your life can be enriched and enriching to others.' Thought models and games can lead to new social architectures."

Dudesek, for example, once mailed himself 500 kilometers across Germany in a crate to take part in an art competition. He also established the Philosophical Databank – a safe containing a computer installed 6,000 meters up in the Himalaya mountains. Should you make it to this computer (and bring the right kind of batteries), you can leave your own philosophical ramblings and read about the four years Dudesek spent transporting a chunk of Welsh granite to Asia. Setting off with just $500 in his pocket, his aim was to examine "the different meanings projected by the public on the rock" along the way (it was blessed by the Pope, among other things). Another project was the Crisis Tourist Office, established in a burned-out pub in Belfast. From there Karel was kidnapped by the IRA and then told to "fuck off – we don't need artists; we want fighters."

A Life of Its Own

Media-savvy observers criticized Piazza for its long periods of inactivity or on-screen confusion. They doubted whether the interest of the public had been adequately piqued. But Piazza rapidly developed a life of its own: ten fan clubs started in Germany. People bought picture phones so they could hook up to the Piazza. Some even started cutting Van Gogh TV out of the communication loop, using personal e-mail and faxes to set up meetings and parties. "People got so used to it they wanted to continue," says Ole.

Piazza can be seen as a work in progress on the way to becoming a permanent multimedia network. "It was a very political project, touching a lot of legal issues, including access to media and copyright," says Heidersberger. "But in general, we saw no major legal obstacles to making such a system a permanent feature of society."

The Piazza experiment led to a three-day show aired over NHK, Japan's largest broadcaster, this past August. "It's part of a long-term plan to bring interactivity to Japan," Heidersberger says. More than 100,000 calls a night swamped the switchboard, as a result a dedicated satellite link between NHK and a weekly show on a Berlin cable system is under consideration. And Dudesek has been busy working out the details of a global version of Piazza Virtuale, which would air from Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics and include anyone watching the games.

Should Piazza succeed in its exported form, it may herald a redefinition of the generations-old, passive medium we now call television. 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." ■ ■ ■

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