

Presenting “Piazza Virtuale” in five different ways. On using common.garden and other media for access to archived media art works and academic research

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Abstract

“Piazza virtuale” by the art collective Van Gogh TV” was one of the most ambitious and probably the largest media art project in history. The group created for more than three months a daily television program at the 1992 documenta in Kassel from a container studio right next to the Fridericianum that was broadcast by a public cable television station, by various other TV stations in Europe and internationally via satellite. The goal was to include the audience in as many ways as possible into the program: “Piazza virtuale” therefore was interactive television and an early Social Medium. The viewers could call in and discuss during the show or trigger various applications with their touch tone phones. This paper describes some of the findings that we came up with during a three-year research project on “Piazza virtuale”, but more importantly the different ways and media that we used to publicize the digitized and archived material from “Piazza virtuale” as well as our own research. Apart from a book and a website, there are also a video documentary, an exhibition and a permanent online exhibition with the new and innovative tool common.garden that was developed during the COVID epidemic by Dutch artist Constant Dullaart.

Keywords

Interactive Television, Van Gogh TV, Piazza Virtuale, Participation, Net Art, Online Archive, Online Presentation, common.garden, Documenta, Constant Dullaart

Introduction

Van Gogh TV was a collective of hackers and artists who, with their “Piazza virtuale” project at documenta 1992, created a precursor to the interaction and collaboration that characterises the internet today. The writer and a group of scholars have undertaken a three-year research project with the support of Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), that preserved and analyzed this ground-breaking, but little known art project. In our final findings we have argued that the project invited the audience to interact with the show and its viewers. While at the time, the project was regarded as one example of the then-trendy concept of

“interactive television”, from today’s point of view, it comes across as a forerunner of the social media of today, because its viewers could not only choose different programming options, but actually interact with other viewers, if they were lucky. [1]

The research results and archived material from “Piazza virtuale” were published in a number of different formats and media, including an academic, English-language book, a website, a documentary video, an exhibition in a Berlin art space and an online exhibition that was created with the tool common.garden. The latter presentation method was devised by the Dutch artist Constant Dullaart during the COVID epidemic as a way to create online exhibitions that did not just try to mimic traditional exhibitions in physical space, but made use of the specific properties of the internet.

At the same time it allows for activities such as openings, inaugural address, guided tours, audio tours and informal meetings with artists and art lovers within the show that typically take place in physical museums and galleries. common.garden also allows for the presentation of all kinds of multimedia content including images, PDFs, audio and video files, plus embedded websites and Social Media content such as Instagram posts or YouTube videos. As we had a lot of newly digitized and archived video material as a result of our research project common.garden proved to be an ideal tool to present this material.

In this contribution I will focus on these new and promising ways to allow a global audience access to media art works in easily curated and designed exhibitions and compare its specific qualities with the traditional methods of presenting academic research. These issues have been tackled in the previous ISEA Summits on new media art archiving, for instance in the contributions by Oliver Grau, Vladlena Gromova or Rodrigo Guzman Serrano to the First Summit [2] and by Byeongwon Ha, Flóra Barkóczi or Tabea Lurk & Jürgen Enge in the Second Summit. [3]

While at the current moment regular exhibitions in physical space are possible again, the option to present current or archived media art online for a worldwide audience with common.garden is of great relevance and an

achievement of the COVID period that should not be easily discarded or dismissed.

Online exhibitions like ours on Van Gogh TV are an unique and attractive way to present archived media works that is a real alternative to traditional websites or more traditional media. While arranging our archived material for presentation we learned that a linked and networked approach worked best for our needs, and so we made sure to create as many ties, physical as well as immaterial and conceptual, between the different forms presentations as possible. We ended up creating a rhizomatic structure where the different elements of the network shed light onto each other.



Figure 1. The container studio of Van Gogh TV next to the Fridericianum in Kassel, where documenta is held every five years. The design of the posters on the containers is by Van Gogh TV founder Mike Hentz. Note satellite dish for international television transmissions on the roof. © Ali Altschaffel.

What was Van Gogh TV and what was “Piazza virtuale”?

“Piazza virtuale” was a media experiment that took place at documenta IX in 1992. Van Gogh TV, a group of artists and hackers, wanted to transfer the concept of an Italian piazza – a place for casual meetings and conversations – into the mass medium of television. To do this, they used all the electronic media available at the time to involve the television audience, who could watch the program daily on the German public TV station 3Sat, in what was happening on the screen.

People could participate in the program via telephone, fax, mailbox and videophone, join discussions, participate in an online chat, make music and paint together or move an interactive camera in the studio in Kassel. Via videophone, programs from the so-called “Piazzettas” – micro

studios in many cities in Germany, in other European cities and even in Japan – were streamed to Kassel.

In this early “virtual community” (Howard Rheingold), many phenomena that are today seen as defining characteristics of net culture could be observed for the first time by a wider public in the German-speaking world. As a media art project shaped by audience’ contributions, the project anticipated many of the characteristics of contemporary social media. For “Piazza virtuale,” Van Gogh TV was awarded the Siemens Media Art Prize at the Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in 1993 and an “Honorary Mention” at the Prix Ars Electronica. [4]



Figure 2. Screenshot of one of the innovative interactive show segments.. The television viewers could direct Avatar-like characters with their touch-tone telephone. ©Van Gogh TV.

Van Gogh TV, the organizers of “Piazza virtuale,” had at that time already a number of previous media art, radio and television projects under their belt. Its members came from an art scene in which artistic work in collectives was as common and important as presenting these activities under names reminiscent of brand or company names. Van Gogh TV was founded in an art-historical situation when collective artistic practices were becoming increasingly prominent. In the 1980ies and early 1990s art collectives such as Irwin, the Guerilla Girls, General Idea or Survival Research Laboratories devised a new art practice that wanted to overcome the cliché of the lonely individualist artist-genius and instead focused on collective art production. These groups differed from historical artist groups such as the Surrealists or Fluxus in that they not only shared a common mindset or aesthetic, but that they actually worked exclusively together and created their works collectively.

Van Gogh TV was founded in 1986 by artists Mike

Hentz, Karel Dudesek, Benjamin Heidersberger and Salvatore Vanasco. Hentz and Dudesek had previously belonged to the artist group Minus Delta t, founded in 1978, which carried out actions, performances and concerts against the backdrop of the German punk and new wave scene. Minus Delta t also carried out a series of projects that, in addition to their performances and concerts, already worked with media such as video, radio, computers and computer networks, slow scan video, and television. [5]

These included “The Project” at ars electronica in 1986 and their participation in documenta 8 in 1987, where, in addition to their appearance as “cultural police” and performances at the York discotheque in Kassel, the group parked a “media bus” with a video editing station and other production media on Friedrichsplatz in the heart of Kassel, from which they operated a pirate radio station during the exhibition. [6]

Hence, “Piazza virtuale” is part of a perplexing multitude of other works and (media) art groups that preceded the project or developed out of it. “Piazza virtuale” was a culmination of practises, 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 its own right, despite its 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.

The sheer number of projects, groups and activities by the group have made it very difficult to present the work of Van Gogh TV and “Piazza virtuale”. There are next to no finalized artworks in the traditional sense. Instead we were left with a multitude of documents of their activities in various formats: first of all over 600 hours of recordings of their television shows on analog video tapes, more than thirty paper files and folders with correspondences in respect to the “Piazza virtuale”, posters, fliers, stickers, postcards, press booklets, faxes, sketches, audio-recordings of interviews and radio shows, even some old hard disks, blue prints of hardware that the group built, and print-outs of computer code that was written in order to realize the concept of the show to let the audience interact with the television show.

Whereas our website allowed us to make a lot of these digitized and archived documents available to the audience in a way a book never could, it was with common.garden that we had an adequate way to present and contextualized these documents.

Working with the estate of Van Gogh TV

Van Gogh TV’s “Piazza Virtuale” inhabits its own unique space in the prehistory of net 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, the legacy of Van Gogh TV is mostly not digital, a factor that turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Whereas we first complained about the large volume of material that we had to digitize in order to process it with 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 Van Gogh TV estate – such as the archived emails on an Apple hard disk – had become inaccessible in the more than two decades since “Piazza virtuale.”

The VHS and Betamax tapes that were delivered to us in

stacks of moving boxes might not have been as easily handled as a collection of 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 not manufactured anymore and are only available at specialized labs. The three dozen files with photos and paper correspondences with collaborators were not conveniently searchable for keywords or could easily be filed and analyzed with contemporary computer programs. And 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 that we had received survived for a period of time that most digital formats did not.

In order to be able to access all the video and paper material on computers, we first had to digitize the corpus that was given to us. A laboratory in Berlin transferred all of the 569 tapes that we had received from Van Gogh TV into MPEG format with a data rate of 8000 kBits/s, a frame rate of 25 pictures per second and a resolution of 720 x 576. While today much higher quality standards are possible, that is akin to the resolution of the Full D1 PAL standard that was in use when “Piazza Virtuale” was broadcast. We ended up with a collection of files 2.65 Terabyte in size. Since this file size was unmanageable, the video files were converted into MP4s with a data rate of 2000 kBits/s and an average size between 2 or 3 Gigabyte per video file. Hence, all the data from the project – the result of over a year of concentrated and hard work of two dozen people, preserved on various data storage media that were delivered to us in more than two dozen moving boxes

– has the size of 873 GB now and fit onto a contemporary hard drive the size of a cigarette pack.

The paper documents were scanned – most of them manually, some with the help of an automated paper feed – and stored in TIFF format, that was later converted into PDF files with Optical Character Recognition (OCR). As part of our agreement with the artists, all four members of the groups received hard disks with all the digitized material for their personal archives and future projects. We also stored the material on several hard drives, some of which are kept outside of our offices for safekeeping.

All of the material has also been uploaded for archival purposes on various servers. All the videos were uploaded to the Panopto online video platform that my school uses for video hosting. We decided to use Panopto rather than commercial services such as YouTube or Vimeo – even though a lot of the edited video clips have also been published on our YouTube channel for a broader audience – for a number of reasons: First of all, YouTube automatically codes videos into a lower resolution and also limits the number of videos that users can host for free. We also felt more comfortable using a server that was in the possession of the university rather than an internet company from the US. Concerns about copyright and privacy were other reasons to use Panopto.

The paper scans and other shared documents such as notes, essays or spreadsheets are hosted on Seafile, an open-source, cross-platform file-hosting software system that my university have access to. This platform also turned out to be convenient for sharing edited videos and other files between researchers that do not always work in the same physical space together.

While OCR allows searches in paper documents, the access to specific, topical segments in the videos was much more difficult. After looking at different annotation software, we eventually settled for Motion Bank, a video annotation system that is currently in development at Hochschule Mainz. The system was originally designed to annotate dance performances. Using the Piecemaker web application that is part of the software, users of the application can record and annotate web videos in real time. After annotation the software allows for searches for keywords in an index that will provide direct links to video segments that have been annotated with these keywords. The most recent version of Piecemaker has been adapted to the data structure of the Web Annotation Model of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and the annotations will be stored in an XML file that other video annotation software – such as ELAN, for instance – can read.

“Piazza virtuale” as a television event

But what exactly was it that Van Gogh TV did at docu-

menta? Their activities were twofold: On the one hand the group maintained a presence at the exhibition despite the fact that they had not been invited as artists, but were just part of the support program. But the main focus of their activities was of course the daily television show on 3Sat that was at times watched by a considerable audience on the then-new public cable channel, often up to 30.000 viewers.

Lets first look at what the group did in the physical installation in Kassel. The group had set up their own television studio right next to the Fridericianum in Kassel, where documenta is held every five years. It consisted out of 15 industrial containers that were set up as a two-story structure with two wings. Due to their support by various commercial and public sponsors the group was able to work with a staff of around two dozen people, that included technicians, hackers, editors, PR representatives, and even a cook.

While the number of staff members was huge for an art project, it was very small considering that the group had to produce a daily television show for three months. Most of the staff members had never worked on a professional television production before and 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: a very innovative television show that invited the audience at home to participate in the show. [7]



Figure 3. Television viewers could play instruments on TV screen in interaction with others at “Piazza virtuale”. © Ali Altschaffel.

What the audience saw on television was an eclectic mix of highly innovational shows that tried to involve the

audience in various ways. For this, Van Gogh TV made use of the then-brandnew touch-tone dial technology to create a back channel to their shows. Viewers could use their touch-tone phone to control a number of different programs that the group had devised for broadcast and an audience in Germany, Austria and parts of Switzerland was able to observe these interactions live on television.

In two music shows, “Interactive Classic Orchestra” and “Rap’em Higher”, the participants could trigger samples with their telephone keys and make music together; in “Atelier” (Studio) people could paint together by operating a simple drawing program. In the segment “Sarah and Daniel” the viewers could steer Avatar-like representations of themselves on the television screen and record their own private confessions in “Beichtstuhl” (Confessional).

The other way to interact on the show was in call-in-shows like “Coffeehouse”, where up to four callers could chitchat on air. This program came closest to the concept of a “self-generating show” that Piazza virtuale was based on, since viewers could get involved by calling in, faxing in or conversing on a computer chat without any interference from the artists. The idea was to create an informal situation for conversations, just like in a Viennese coffee house.



Figure 4. Screenshot of interactive music show “Disco Fever” where television viewers could make user with other members of the audience via touch-tone telephone. © Van Gogh TV.

It was this show that earned Pizza virtuale the derisive nickname “Hello TV”. Many callers only said “Hello”. Some of them were so frightened or surprised that they were on TV that they hung up right away. Those who stayed on the line had five minutes to find a topic of conversation with other callers before their connection was terminated in favor of new callers. A 3Sat employee

made sure that no insults, political extremism, advertising, or pornography made it into the program, a practice known as “content moderation” on contemporary social media today, but still simply called “censorship” on “Piazza Virtuale”.

Other formats invited the callers to talk to scientists or remote research vessels or ocean platforms, or to comment on or participate in musical live performances in the studio. A group of regular callers even came to Kassel to meet the makers of Van Gogh TV and each other in person – an example of a “virtual community” that developed as a result of the broadcast.

On common.garden

Dutch artists Constant Dullaart has created common.garden, the platform that we used to create a virtual online-version of our exhibition on “Piazza virtuale” in 2020 with the support of the American art institution Lightbeam in New York, where he was a “rapid response fellow” during the first lock-down: “Dullaart will explore new modes of social media and connection in a time of social distancing and isolation,” reads the project description on the website of Lightbeam. “The artist will reconfigure and rebuild social media formats to set up a series of venues for casual social interaction– bars, community spaces, institutions, meeting rooms, and more. These encounters would be able to occur in conditions reminiscent of ‘real life’, without the need to make an appointment or create accounts that reveal one’s identity and personal information to a large tech company.” [8] Hence, one critic has called the finalized project “the only art exhibition platform fully exited from surveillance capitalism” [9]

In its current form, common.garden is an ad-free, web-based space where registered users can build their own social environments and interact with others. The site has been used by international museums and galleries such as Savvy Contemporary, Berlin, Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam, HWMK, Dortmund, Office Impart, Berlin, or Friesmuseum, Leeuwarden. The site has also found its uses after the COVID epidemic ended: the project distant.gallery has enabled international curators to create online exhibition from locations such as Dehli, Kinshasa, Jakarta or Tel Aviv or with Russian artists in exile all over the globe. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and the Mystetskyj Arsenal Museum in Kyiv used common.garden for a collaboration and to make their exhibitions accessible beyond their rooms, when no other cooperation was possible because of the Russian war against the Ukraine.

Writer Laura Wurth opines in “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Quarterly”: “Using the Common Garden is a dizzying experience that fits perfectly with Dullaart’s vision of the internet as a blank medium that can be dis-

rupted for the greater good, rather than existing as a place for exploitation and crass commercialization.” [10]

Different types of documentation

As I have mentioned in the introduction, the results of our research have been published in different forms: a book, a website, a documentary video, an exhibition at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin and the aforementioned virtual exhibition on open.garden. In order to maximize the impact of these different publications and to create connections between the different material that we had archived and researched, we were looking for a way to interlink the content of these respective media. We ended up using QR codes that due to COVID had come in wide use only at that time in Germany, despite the fact that the technology has existed since 1994.



Figure 5. This QR code contains a link to the PDF version of the book on “Piazza virtuale” at <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/e0/fc/36/oa9783839460665Gcc2tWTcGf9ig.pdf>.

Book The English-language book is the most comprehensive source of meta information on the project. It contains a historical overview of Van Gogh TV and the art groups and projects that preceded it, a chronology of the work on this particular project, a discussion of the media and art historic background of the project, an account of the activities of the group in Kassel and on television, and detailed descriptions of the various segments of the show, the “Piazzettas” (micro studios all over Europe that provided programming) and the technologies and devices that the group developed.

It has around 100 photos, screenshots, sketches and other illustrations, some of them in color, but obviously we were not able to include all the pictures that we had and only screenshots of videos. The book can be downloaded under Creative Commons License BY-NC-SA for free from the website of the publisher. Every chapter has a QR

code that provides a link to the website that has all the pictures, sketches, videos and other material that we were not able to put into the book.

These QR codes turned out to provide the crucial links and connections between the different forms of documentation, not just in the book, but also in the exhibition that was held at Künstlerhaus Bethanien. In sum, they created a inter-connected web of references and correlations that greatly improved the understanding of the project. It also allowed to create connections to media formats that we could not be presented in certain kinds of presentations, such as videos that obviously cannot be shown in a book. Lastly, it allowed us to overcome certain limitations of size, and for instance put the many pictures, sketches or memos that we had found on the website with its possibility of limitless storage rather than in the book.

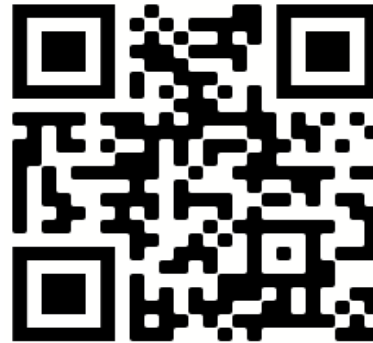


Figure 6. This QR code contains a link to project website at <https://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de>.

Website The website is the central presentation of our research. It is the most easily accessible part of the documentation of our archived material as it is available online. As of this writing, our page is the first Google result when searching for either “Van Gogh TV” or “Piazza virtuale”. The texts that have been written particularly for the site are short and concise to address the reading habits online. While the information in the book is more comprehensive and in-depth, the website has a lot of material that we could not put into a book that has certain limitations as far as size is concerned. We also were able to include videos and other multi-media material into the site.

The artists did not want us to publish the complete digitized recordings of the over 100 shows on the page. Technically this would have been possible, but raised the question what the benefit and the affordance of such a large collection of video would be for the audience. (All the shows are stored on our video server, and we can provide scholars access if they are interested in particular shows.) Instead we chose a “curated” approach, where we put rep-

representative shows and clips on the site. We also uploaded a selection of video interviews, that were conducted during documenta and had never been published, television reports about the show, and clips from previous projects and performances. The show had various different segments and contributions from the different “Piazettas” all over Europe and Japan, and each of these offerings now has its own comprehensive page on our website, that can be directly addressed with links of QR codes, a method that opened both the book and the exhibition to the web.



Figure 7. This QR code contains a link to the virtual exhibition at <https://piazza-virtuale.common.garden/>.

Virtual and physical exhibition The great benefit of traditional exhibition is the direct contact with auratic originals. Whereas books or websites provide only reproductions of art works and other material, the exhibition delivers the “real thing”. In our case, however, the problem was that there were next to none auratic originals to show. The largest part of the material were the digitized records of the show, and therefore we had to come up with original ideas to create an exhibition that was actually worth visiting in person.

One can just show a limited number of videos in a show, and most of the paper material that we had was rather dull-looking correspondences via letters or faxes with contributors and companies that were of great interest for our research into the development of the program, but had little visual fascination. There were, however, a small number of concept sketches, posters, postcards and other promotional material that had a certain graphic attraction that were presented in vitrines in the final exhibition.

We were also able to track down some of the old equipment that the group had built by themselves, including a DIY television transmitter, computer modules and prototypes for a video encoder that served as material remnants of the activities of Van Gogh TV. Photo documentation of “Piazza virtuale” were presented as an analog slide show and as large prints. A favorite of the audience were the two historic Panasonic videophones that allowed to send

still images from one device to the other and even to print them out. An early version of the documentary on “Piazza virtuale” was shown in a small viewing room.



Figure 8. View of the exhibition at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin with Mike Hentz’ mural on the right-hand side © Galya Feierman

However, all of this material would not have made for a good show, so we had to actually create new material for the presentation of the historic material. Most impressive was the mural that Van Gogh TV member Mike Hentz created specifically for the show. In the last room of the exhibition was a selection of artworks by other artists that contextualized the work of Van Gogh TV, including pieces by Fred Forrest, Mieko Shiomi, Nam June Paik, Miranda July and others.

One of the attractions of the original “Piazza virtuale” was the “Robot Camera” that television viewers were able to control with their touch tone telephones and that moved through the studio containers in Kassel on rails. We were able to obtain the original camera from the Hamburg artist Niclas Baginsky who had built it in 1992 and originally wanted to reactivate it for the show.

Both the video stream of the camera as well as the video recordings made by the videophones in the exhibition, were supposed to be included in the virtual version of the exhibition. However, this turned out to be technically impossible. So Benjamin Heidersberger, one of the founders of the Van Gogh TV, devised a low-tech alternative to these options: He mounted a small digital surveillance camera on a robot vacuum cleaner that drove automatically through the exhibition when it was closed. A live stream of images was broadcast on the internet, where viewers could also use a web interface that pointed the camera in different directions.

All of the different types of shows as well as all the Piazzettas were represented in the exhibition by large screenshots, that were presented in two different rooms. On the front end of these rooms a selection of clips from these different programs were projected with a video beamer. Every screenshot had its own QR code that one could scan with a smartphone and get a direct link to the respective web page that had more information, commentary, multimedia material on the format or Piazzetta in question. As the server statistics showed, the audience made regular use of this possibility, and hence the whole show served as a gateway into the website.



Figure 9. Salvatore Vanasco, one of the four founders of Van Gogh TV, in front of a screenshot in the exhibition that is linked with a QR code to the corresponding page with more information, video clips, interviews and more on the project website. © Galya Feirman

When the show was planned, we could never be certain if it might not be impeded by COVID restrictions. For a time, we even had to fear that *all* exhibitions in Berlin would not be able to open right at the time, when the show was planned. Fortunately the funding that we had received for the show had exactly the purpose to support experimental shows that combined physical and virtual elements to address this specific situation.

Therefore using common.garden as a key element in the presentation of the works was part of the exhibition concept from the very beginning. In the end, designer Tereza Havlíková recreated the floor plan of the exhibition as foundation for the virtual version of the show and placed the different exhibits at precisely the location they were in the physical show. That allowed for guided tours, performances and an online opening that around 80 people attended. We found this two-dimensional version of the show preferable to the 3D exhibitions that other art institu-

tions presented during the COVID epidemic with Mozilla Hubs, Art.Spaces or Exhibitbit, because these online exhibits were often difficult to maneuver and provided only a dull representation of bland “White Cube”-type art spaces.

common.garden on the other hand allowed for easy integration of all types of media both from our website, but also from other sources, including an Instagram post by Miranda July and a YouTube video that automatically restarts every time you access the exhibition. A slide show function allowed for a replication of the actual analogue slide show that took place in the physical exhibition. Also included in the show were the 100 broadcasting schedules that were written during the show. By clicking on the representation of these schedules in open.garden one could download a complete PDF files with all of these documents. However, we were not able to integrate the video stream from our DIY robot camera on the vacuum cleaner into common.garden because the proprietary software of the surveillance camera did not allow embedding.



Figure 10. This QR code contains a link to the documentary video at <https://video.hs-mainz.de/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=4c0ad45d-1725-4f8c-ace4-adf300e2fc63#>.

Documentary video Due to our digitization of the 600 hours of live recordings of “Piazza virtuale” and other works of Van Gogh TV, we had a rich trove of material for the audiovisual documentation of the project. With this in mind, we had video-taped all of the 31 interviews that we conducted with the artists and other participants in the project, first with a video camera on the location of the interview, later – when COVID made traveling impossible – with the recording function of the video-conferencing software that we used. With this footage, we edited a 40-minute video that provides the easiest access to the complicated structure and many details of “Piazza virtuale”.

This video has turned out to be the best way to inform newcomers to the project with a brief, focused introduction into “Piazza virtuale”. The commentary of the interviewees render the archival material more transparent and

“readable”, and the description of the difficult and exhausting production of the project even added an element of human drama to the whole affair. We are currently in touch with a German television station that is interested in acquiring a revised version of the film for broadcast.

Conclusion

“Piazza virtuale” was a ground-breaking, multi-faceted and huge art project, and so was our project to understand, archive and research the project – as well as our efforts to publicized our findings and the material that we had archived. In stepping beyond the traditional academic publication methods – books, essays, articles and maybe a website – we were able to address a larger audience beyond both the academic and the art world. By connecting this material in the various media via links and QR codes we were able to create a much richer, interwoven presentation of our material than the publication in any single medium could have achieved.

By using common.garden we partly replicated and modernized the new approaches that Van Gogh TV took in the early 1990s. While not in any way wanting to diminish or to relativize the accomplishments of the collective, we tried in our own way to find ways to connect physical and virtual space and to take art out of the institutions that traditionally show it and often limit or restrict access to the work on display. Our research has been made accessible in the most comprehensive way that we could think of: by putting the book on the net in a “Open Culture” fashion with a Creative Commons, by putting a lot of material that did not fit into the book on the website, and by allowing everybody who was not able to come to Berlin in December 2021 to visit the exhibition online in common.garden, and even offering them the chance to participate in tours, performances, discussions and the opening which is traditionally only available to visitors in the actual exhibition.

In this way we did not only reflect the latest state of the art of easily accessible online technologies that we could get our hands on. To our own surprise the final result was not only a comprehensive and original presentation of our research and of the archived material, but also a reflection of the circumstances under which the project took place: a global epidemic and health crisis that forced all of us to get used to new disembodied virtual online exchanges and interactions that also shaped the different forms of presentation that I have described in this essay.

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