Studio Azzurro and Rai:
Retrieving Neglected Histories from Artist Archives

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Abstract

This paper examines the overlooked collaborations between the Milanese artist collective Studio Azzurro and Italy's national broadcaster, Rai, during the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on previously unpublished documents, sketches, and footage preserved in the artists' archive, it reassesses the role of artistic contributions in Italian television history. While some collaborations reflect Studio Azzurro's openness to experimenting with television formats and aesthetics—as well as Rai's interest in leveraging the artists' technical expertise—the many unrealized project proposals also reveal the structural limitations of Italian broadcasting in accommodating more ambitious creative interventions. Studio Azzurro's archive thus emerges as a valuable resource for reconstructing neglected aspects of Rai's programming, shedding light on the intersections between contemporary art and the production logics of public television. By foregrounding these materials, the paper explores the convergence of art history, television history, and cultural production, offering new perspectives on the institutional tensions that shaped Italy's media landscape in the late twentieth century.

Keywords: Artist archives; Italian television history; Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana); Studio Azzurro; Video art.

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1   Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, European television underwent profound transformations driven by legal reforms, deregulation, and the advent of commercial broadcasting. If, in the previous decades, television in Italy, much like in other European countries, was conceived as a "public service" with the mission to inform, educate, and entertain its viewers (Grasso 2011: 30; Freccero 2013: 29–31; Menduni 2016: 56–58), the 1980s marked a decisive shift. This period saw the rise of private broadcasters and a growing reliance on advertising revenue, which deeply affected the logic behind programming schedules, production, and the content itself (Grasso 2011: 28–29; Menduni 2016: 61–62).

The end of Italy's state monopoly over television led to an expansion of the offering, characterized by the pro-liferation of entertainment genres and the increasing hybridization of information and entertainment formats (Menduni 2016: 62)—a transformation deeply intertwined with the rise of consumer culture. Following John Ellis' (2000) periodization of television history, the 1980s can be identified as the age of "availability", giving way in the 1990s to the age of "plenty", as television content became more abundant and diversified, flowing across multiple channels, including satellite platforms. These developments brought significant changes to professional routines, programming schedules, and audience expectations, which were often influenced by American television models that privileged spectacle and immediacy.

This dynamic also affected the relationship between artists and broadcasters. In countries like Germany, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, where public broadcasters were able to resist some of the pressures of commercialization, artists were often invited to contribute to television programming with commissions that challenged and expanded traditional formats (Lischi 2001: 3–7; Lischi 2023: 52–58). In Italy, however, the opportunities for an artist to collaborate with public and private television networks remained more limited. Artists were largely confined to service roles within the industry, with only rare opportunities for creative expression through television or the broadcast of their work (Lagonigro 2022a: 398).

Within this context, the collaboration between Radiotelevisione italiana (Rai) and Studio Azzurro, a Milan-based artist collective, serves as a remarkable case study to analyze these dynamics and their implications for artistic creativity as well as local television history. Active at the intersection of cinema, video art, and post-avant-garde theater, Studio Azzurro collaborated with the national broadcaster between the early 1980s into the early 2000s. Their archive today stands as a unique repository for reconstructing overlooked or underexplored histories of artistic contributions to Italian television. As such, it can contribute to complete the cartography of European media cultures during these transformative decades, offering new insights into the history of Italian television at the intersection with contemporary art history.

This paper draws on art-historical analysis and archival research to pursue these objectives. It will first con-textualize the evolution of Italian television during the 1980s and 1990s, with particular interest for artistic contributions to Rai's programming. It will then introduce the work of Studio Azzurro, presenting both their known and lesser-known collaborations with the Italian national broadcaster. Special attention will be dedi-cated to a selection of unrealized and unpublished projects, preserved in the artists' archive, which shed light on the collective's vision in fostering interdisciplinary dialogues as well as Rai's production policies. Studio Azzurro's archive will thus emerge as a relevant source for expanding local television history, while also high-lighting the importance of such narratives for mapping the European context.

2   Artists and TV: the Italian Context between the 1980s and 1990s

The period spanning from the late 1970s to the early 1980s represented a time of profound and rapid transfor-mation of Italian media culture. While much of Europe had transitioned to color broadcasting at least a decade earlier, Italy's national broadcaster, Rai, introduced color television only in February 1977 (Grasso 2011: 24). Therefore, the launch of color broadcasting in the country coincided with the rise of private, and commercial broadcasters all over Europe, with the widespread diffusion of remote controls, and thus normalization of channel surfing (Lagonigro 2022a: 401).

The transition from a monochrome, state-controlled, and pedagogically oriented system offering just two national channels to a multi-channel, color-dominated environment in the 1980s marked a decisive cultural and aesthetic turn. The emergence of commercial platforms in Italy—the first being Canale 5—invigorated small and medium-sized industries that capitalized on television's growing role as an advertising-driven "enormous supermarket"—as Grasso (2011: 26) terms it. Advertising rapidly became the primary engine propelling programming development, driving the "Americanization" of Italian television—a shift that affected not only the formats and aesthetics of both national and private programming but more deeply the underlying logic governing schedules, production routines, and audience engagement (Grasso 2011: 33; Freccero 2013: 48–53; Menduni 2016: 62–64).

Moreover, unlike in other European countries—one of the most notable examples being the United Kingdom, with the BBC[1]—in Italy public television struggled to face the competition of private channels and maintain a solid cultural programming, with only limited opportunities for experimental artistic contributions. In this respect, the contrast with other international broadcasters is stark.

In the United States, public stations such as Boston's WGBH, San Francisco's KQED and New York's WNET/Thirteen actively engaged with artists since the 1960s, promoting artist-in-residence programs, workshops and showcasing the work of video- and media art pioneers, such as Nam June Paik, Thomas Tadlock, Aldo Tambellini, Bill Viola, Stan Vanderbeek, and Joan Jonas.[2] Similarly, in Europe, Belgium's RTBF dedicated a monthly series to video art, *Vidéographie* (1975–1985), which also produced new works commissioned to international artists. In Germany, Gerry Schum founded the renowned *Fernsehgalerie Berlin* (*Berlin Television Gallery*, 1968), which broadcast commissioned projects by contemporary artists intended as "artworks specifically realized for publication by means of television" (Huffman 1987: 12).[3] Moreover, between the late 1970s and late 1980s both public broadcasters—such as ZDF with *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* (*Little Television Play*)—and private ones—such as RTL—produced and aired works of (then) emerging artists and directors, such as Robert Wilson's *Video 50* (1978) or Alexander Kluge's *10 vor 11* (*10 to 11*, 1988). In France, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) produced *Cartes Postales Vidéo* (*Video Postcards*,1984–1986) by artists Robert Cahen, Stéphane Huter and Alain Longuet, which was later acquired and aired by several other broadcasters (Lischi 2023: 55). Around the same years in Spain, RTVE produced the ambitious series *El arte del video* (*The art of video*, 1989), commissioning short video works from internationally renowned artists (Lischi 2023: 56). In the United Kingdom, the BBC aired David Hall's *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces)* as early as 1971. Later, Channel 4 broadcasted programs dedicated to national and international experimental film and video, respectively *The eleventh hour* (1982–1990) and *Ghost in the Machine* (1986–1987). Notably it also produced original works such as the series *A TV Dante* (1990) by Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips.[4]

In Italy, an early and promising example was set in 1952 by Lucio Fontana, who—before the official launch of national television broadcasting in 1954—conducted experiments in Rai's Milan studios with *Immagini luminose in movimento* (*Moving Light Images*), using his *Concetto spaziale* perforated canvases as screens for light projections.[5] Yet this remained an isolated event. In the 1960s and 1970s artists collaborated with Italian

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1. The BBC stands as an exemplary model of public service broadcasting in Europe, offering high-quality educational content that enabled it to compete with private networks (Grasso 2011:48–49). Among its many cultural programs, *Ways of Seeing* (1972)—a series of four thirty-minute films created by John Berger with producer Mike Dibb and later adapted into the eponymous book—remains particularly notable. Revolutionary both in its content and format, the first episode famously opens with Berger cutting (or simulating cutting) through Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* hanging from the walls of the National Gallery in London. See *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Episode 1 – *Camera and Painting*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk (Last accessed 13-05-2025).

2. In the United States, public broadcasters played a pivotal role in supporting video art by granting artists access to professional studios, technical expertise, and equipment. This institutional support enabled the production and broadcast of pioneering works such as *The Medium is the Medium* (1969) and *Video: The New Wave* (1973), both aired by WGBH. Notably, WNET/Thirteen in New York and WGBH in Boston established influential artist-in-residence programs—the *TV Lab* (1972) and the *New Television Workshop* (1974), respectively—which became key platforms for exploring television as a creative medium.

3. The productions of Gerry Schum's *Fernsehgalerie* included: *Land Art*, a series of short films aired by Sender Freies Berlin (SBF) in April 1969; Jan Dibbet's visionary project *TV as a Fireplace* (1969); and its second and final series / TV exhibition *Identifications* (1970).

4. On the history of artistic contributions to television in the United States and Europe between the 1970s and 1980s see: Huffman (1987: 11–14), Valentini (2010) and Lagonigro (2022a: 398–399), Lischi (2023: 49–58).

5. On Lucio Fontana's experiments with television and the *Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione*, see Leuzzi (2015: 2–3)

television primarily as set designers, creators of opening titles, film and television commercials—a notable example being Pino Pascali (Leuzzi 2015: 11). Artistic contributions remain limited in the 1970s, with exceptions such as Fabio Mauri's *Televisore che piange* (*Crying Television*, 1972) or Eugenio Carmi's and Gianni Toti's contributions to Rai's experimental programs (Pio 2022, Barenghi 2012: 144–165).

These initiatives dwindled as the transformation of Italian television unfolded from the late 1970s onward. The rise of commercial networks marked the advent of what Umberto Eco (1983) famously termed "neotelevision" a mode of television premised on spectacle, immediacy, and self-referentiality. During this phase, videographics based on early digital systems gained prominence, playing a central role in shaping the visual identity of both public and commercial networks—a tendency that would only intensify throughout the following decade (Lagonigro 2022a: 401–402).

Within this context, a new tension emerged. Whereas the previous decade had been characterized by a critical resistance among artists toward television as a mass medium, from the 1980s onward, artists' interest in exploring and contaminating television's language was increasingly curtailed by the networks' tendency to relegate them to "technical" roles (Gallo *et al*. 2020). With few exceptions, artists were mainly employed as set or graphic designers, creating opening sequences for television shows and newscasts, like Mario Sasso, who worked for Rai from 1958 until the 1990s (Leuzzi 2015: 3–10), or Ugo Nespolo (Ferrario 2014: 125). In some cases, artists were also employed for their expertise in video shooting and editing, such as in the case of Studio Azzurro.

Against this backdrop, the collaboration of the Milanese collective with Rai is a particularly illustrative case study. Their experience encapsulates both the normative logic that shaped artistic contributions to Italian television and the exceptions that challenged it. Studio Azzurro's archive preserves multiple examples of such collaborations—many of which remain absent from the existing literature on the subject. Uniquely, this archive not only documents projects that were realized but also contains extensive material on projects that were never produced.

3   Studio Azzurro's Collaboration with Rai

3.1   Militant Communication: The Collective's Roots

Studio Azzurro was officially established as an artist collective in 1982, the same year of the creation of the first "videoenvironment", *Luci di Inganni* (*Lights of Deceptions*).[6] From the outset, the group's poetics revolved around radical cross-contaminations between artistic genres, ranging from design to experimental theatre.[7]

However, the roots of the collective can be traced back to the earlier collaborations of its founding members—director Paolo Rosa, photographer Fabio Cirifino, and animator Leonardo Sangiorgi—in the late 1970s. From the beginning, they shared a fascination with the moving image and the poetics of new media. These interests brought Cirifino and Sangiorgi close to the activities of the Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante (LCM, Militant Communication Workshop), of which Rosa was a founding member alongside other young and socially engaged visual artists, namely Ettore Pasculli, Tullio Brunone, Giovanni Columbu, and Claudio Guenzani. Established in Milan in 1975, LCM promoted a series of initiatives ranging from self-organized exhibitions and workshops to interventions in public space that actively involved youth and student associations.[8] The group's main focus was the critical examination of the techniques, languages, and imagery employed in mass media communication, with the aim of recognizing and countering its manipulative power, and of providing those

and Mari (2020).

6.   The term "videoambient" (videoenvironment) was coined by Studio Azzurro to describe their collaborative projects that aimed to "explode" the notion of video installation into four dimensions, dissolving the boundary between the inside and outside of the screen—an idea somehow prefigured by the final scene of *Facce di Festa* (1980), the group's first collective project. See also Di Marino (2007: 60–61, 64). Notably, *Luci di inganni* (1982) is also connected with the artists collaboration with Rai, as discussed later in this paper.

7.   This approach led to the invention of video-theatre, a genre Studio Azzurro pioneered in the mid 1980s in collaboration with actor and director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti. See Studio Azzurro and Barberio Corsetti (1988), Rosa and Valentini (1995: 47–59); Di Marino (2007).

8.   On LCM's activity see Madesani (2012).

traditionally relegated to the role of passive consumers with the tools to reclaim the medium as a means of political action. In this sense, LCM advocated for a new understanding of art as a critical creative practice "engaging with life in all its forms and expressions" (LCM 1977: 13). LCM's activity was relatively short-lived, spanning from their first group exhibition, *Strategia d'informazione, distorsione della realtà e diffusione del consenso* (*Information strategy, distorsion of reality and manufacturing of consent*), held at Rotonda della Besana in Milan in May 1976, to their final exhibition/ workshop, *Immagine arma impropria* (*Image improvised weapon*), at Museo della Permanente, Milan, in March 1978. The group also took part in the 1976 Venice Biennale, within the section *L'ambiente* (*The Environment*) at the Italian Pavilion, where their work was presented under the theme *Partecipazione spontanea, azione politica* (*Spontaneous Participation, Political Action*), with an exhibition focused on information strategies (*La Biennale di Venezia* 1976: 112). These experiences not only represent the roots of Studio Azzurro as an artist collective but also reflected a broader critical attitude among young intellectuals and visual artists of the 1970s towards the emerging mass communication media, with television as a primary target of critique.

The famous 1968 slogan "VT is not TV" highlights how—shortly after the launch of the Sony's Portapack—videotape had been revolutionized as a creative medium. The ability to hold a video recorder and decide where to point it brought about new awareness of the medium's emancipatory potential, in contrast to the passive role traditionally assigned to television audiences within mass media communication. LCM's initiatives closely aligned with this critical approach. For instance, in January 1977, in Mantua, LCM organized an exhibition/workshop with students that focused specifically on analyzing the communication strategies adopted by national television news programs (*TG1* and *TG2*) when reporting current events, particularly crime news (LCM 1977, 97–110). The workshop culminated in a videotaped re-enactment of the newscast, conceived as an act of critical reappropriation of a language "that we normally experience passively and unconsciously" (LCM 1977: 98). Notably, in their reporting of this experience, LCM also emphasized the role of videotape as a means of experimentation and "activation" (LCM 1977: 111). By placing the monitor in the center of the workspace its feedback became a crucial device for probing what they described as "the television effect" (LCM 1977: 111) turning the monitor into an apparatus of self-reflection. In doing so, the workshop contributed to the demystification of the television medium itself.

3.2   Studio Azzurro's First TV Appearance on National Television: *Mister Fantasy*

According to the artists' recollections, Studio Azzurro's first contact with Rai took place a few years after the presentation of their first collaborative project, the film *Facce di Festa* (*Party Faces*, 1980), as part of local and international film festivals.[9]

Through the network that gravitated around the Milanese film scene, and particularly *Film-Maker* festival—such as graphic designer Mario Convertino, and artist Mario Sasso—Studio Azzurro met TV producer Paolo Giaccio and the group was invited to showcase their work on national television. This happened in the context of the TV show *Mister Fantasy*, curated by Giaccio and hosted by Carlo Massarini.[10] *Mister Fantasy* aired on Rai 1 (then known as Rete 1) from 1982 to 1984 and was the first Italian television program entirely dedicated to the music video genre, anticipating in many ways the launch of MTV Europe, in 1987. The program not only focused on "music to be seen" (the program's subheading) but also offered a platform to contemporary artists—including those exploring the poetics of the electronic image—to present their work to a wider audience. Notable examples include animations by Mario Convertino and Crudelity Stoffe and performances by key figures of the post-avant-garde theatre scene, such as Magazzini Criminali, Orient Express, La Gaia Scienza, and Falso Movimento (Lagonigro 2018).

As an Italian pioneer of video art, Studio Azzurro was also invited to present its work as part of the show. In 1982, Massarini introduced Studio Azzurro's videonviroment, *Luci di Inganni*, to the audience and later

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9. *Facce di Festa* represents the legacy of the group's activity in the late 1970s. Completed in 1980, the film was screened at the inaugural edition of the Milanese independent film festival *Film-Maker* (June 19–20, 1980), and selected for Venice International Film Festival (August 28 – September 8, 1980).

10. On *Mister Fantasy* see also Liggeri (2007: 360–379) and Di Marino (2018: 360–367). On the show's importance for promoting the work of video- and computer artists see Lagonigro (2018; 2022b).

in 1984, the program aired a dance performance filmed in front of *Due Piramidi* (*Two Pyramids*), a monumental videoenviroment installed in the courtyard of Palazzo del Senato in Milan (Lagonigro 2018: 149–150). Certainly, *Mister Fantasy* represented a unique opportunity for Studio Azzurro, then an emerging artist collective, to showcase and disseminate their work. Moreover, the program's declared "elective affinity with everything that is video" (Lagonigro 2020: 150) generated an interesting interplay.

Both the show's creators and the artists shared a fascination with the monitor as an object, assigning it a central, or even a performative role. On one hand, the ubiquitous presence of a CRT monitor in the program was emphasized by Massarini, who interacted with it almost as a co-host (Lagonigro 2018: 150). On the other, Studio Azzurro's works aimed at transforming the monitor from a mass communication device into a vehicle for electronic images to expand in the physical space and engage the audience on both a sensory and an imaginative level. *Luci di inganni*, for example, was conceived to "animate" a series of design objects with video interferences "stretching" into the surrounding environment, while *Due piramidi* invited the audience to step inside a huge inflatable PVC pyramid, as if "entering a vast screen" (Di Marino 2007: 127). Moreover, both *Luci di Inganni* and *Due piramidi* emerged from collaborative efforts: the former was conceived in dialogue with Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis Group,[11] while the latter continued a relationship established with artist Franco Mazzucchelli in the 1970s, in connection with LCM's activities.[12] In this sense, Studio Azzurro's collaboration with Italian television—particularly through a program like *Mister Fantasy*, which offered an unusually attentive platform for contemporary artistic research—was fully aligned with the group's methodology. Indeed, Studio Azzurro has often described itself as a *bottega*, evoking the artisan workshop as a metaphor for a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to artistic creation (Di Marino 2007: 58–59).

3.3   Rai Commissions: between Technical Work and Creative Contributions

Following their debut, Studio Azzurro's collaboration with Italian television evolved through a series of commissions in which the artists were mainly employed in more "technical" roles, such as filming and video editing—evidence of which now survives in the artists' archive.

In 1984 Studio Azzurro, edited a pilot episode for a miniseries dedicated to the four seasons that featured in the daily "infotainment" television program *Italia Sera*, broadcast on Rai 1.[13] Then, between 1987 and 1989, the artists carried out a series of video shoots inside homes, ateliers, showrooms, and exhibition spaces—primarily in Milan—that featured in *Il piacere di abitare* (*The pleasure of living*), a weekly television segment dedicated to the evolution of Italian design and architecture, with an opening sequence by Ugo Nespolo. This collaboration was particularly significant in highlighting Studio Azzurro's close ties to the world of design, already emerged in their first collaborations with the Memphis Group. Interestingly, in this instance, the artists' video archive was also used as a source for the television program.[14] Studio Azzurro contributed to other television

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11. The Memphis Group (or Memphis Milano) was a collective design studio founded by Ettore Sottsass, together with Martine Bedin, Aldo Cibic, Michele De Lucchi, Nathalie Du Pasquier, Matteo Thun, and George Sowden. First presented at the ARC-74 showroom in Milan in 1982, *Luci di Inganni* has been presented as part of two recent exhibitions: *Enlightened* (Milan, Galleria Memphis Milano, April 13-23, 2023) and *Arte e design. Design è arte* (Gallarate, MAGA, October 13, 2024 – March 02, 2025).

12. In November 1976, LCM, together with other local artists and cultural operators acting outside of conventional structures, founded the Fabbrica di Comunicazione Militante (FCM, Militant Communication Factory) by occupying the former church of San Carpoforo in Milan's Brera district. Franco Mazzucchelli, a founding member, inaugurated the occupation with the installation of his *Contenitore gonfiabile* (*Inflatable Container*) in front of the church, an event marked by an opening party and public assembly. Conceived as a squatted social center, FCM hosted interdisciplinary cultural activities that addressed social issues such as mental health, gender rights, and the reclamation of urban space for local working-class and student communities. Besides LCM, local artists actively involved in FCM included, among others, Fabio Cirifino, Ugo Guarino, Ugo La Pietra, Leonardo Sangiorgi, and Nanda Vigo. The space went on to host performances by international artists such as American composer Phill Niblock, the Living Theatre, and Odin Teatret.

13. The archive of Studio Azzurro holds production estimates and insurance forms associated with the production of this TV segment, as well as the master video of the final work. The short video, approximately five minutes long, was dedicated to theme of *Winter*: it was directed by Dania Lupi and shot by Nicola Pecorini on 16mm film in the countryside near Pavia, while Studio Azzurro was responsible for the video editing.

14. This information is based on conversations with the artists. Today Studio Azzurro's archive preserves a selection of digitized videos produced for *Il piacere di abitare*, such as: an exhibition dedicated to Achille Castiglioni (1984); the private residence of collector and dealer Michel Leo (December 1987); the exhibition of Carlo Bugatti's furniture at Galleria Transepoca, with an installation by Nanda Vigo (March 1988); the apartment of Silvio San Pietro, renovated by architect Paolo Farina (April 1988); the Milanese showroom

segments, such as *Uomini e affari* (*Men and business*, 1989), commissioned by Rai's Lombardy branch, for which they edited archive materials using their own equipment.[15] Later, to mark the beginning of the new millennium, Studio Azzurro was also commissioned by Rai to produce a short five-minute documentary broadcast in December 1999—dedicated to the large installation *Obelisco per la pace* (*Obelisk for peace*) by artist Giulio Ceppi created for the 2000 Jubilee and installed in Piazza dei Cinquecento in Rome.[16]

While these collaborations often placed the artists in roles focused on video editing and, occasionally, direction, they left little to no room for creative experimentation. A notable exception is Studio Azzurro's contribution to the television program *Pista!*, broadcast on Rai 1 between 1986 and 1987 in the afternoon slot. Directed by Luigi Martelli and hosted by Maurizio Nichetti, the show featured a cast including Banda Osiris, Daniela Goggi, Orsetta Gregoretti, and Margherita Pace. *Pista!* was a children's and family variety program that combined Disney films and cartoons with comedy sketches, silly games, and interactive quizzes, allowing viewers to participate via phone calls. Alongside their better-known project for Rai's first satellite channel, RaiSat—a ten-second graphic countdown designed in collaboration with Mario Sasso (Leuzzi 2015: 9; Gazzano 2020)—*Pista!* stands out as one of the few instances in which Studio Azzurro was invited to make a creative contribution to Italian television. For the show, the group conceived and built a video installation that functioned as a visual "stopwatch" for the phone-in quiz segments. Initially designed as a large, three-dimensional pyramid composed of thirty CRT monitors (Fig. 1), the final installation was then scaled down to only sixteen. Additional screens were incorporated into mobile columns and other modular structures that could be rearranged freely across the set.[17]
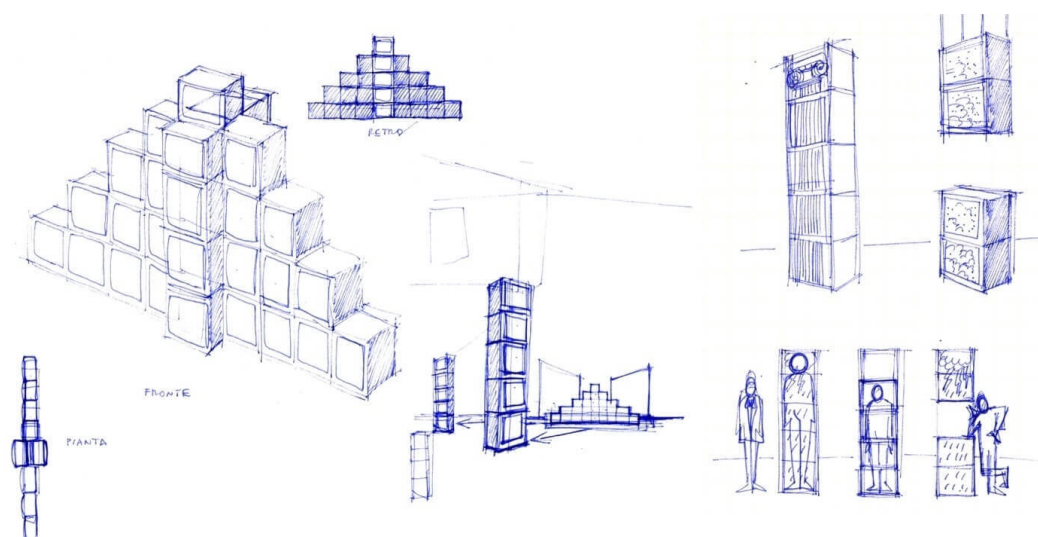

Fig. 1. – Studio Azzurro, Preliminary sketches outlining the video installation for the set of *Pista!*, 1986.
Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.

of fashion designer and artist Cinzia Ruggeri (1988); a special episode featuring designer Cini Boeri (1988); works by architect and illustrator Davide Pizzigoni; the Castello Sem Benelli in Zoagli and a montage of Christmas lights and shop windows in Milan as examples of urban décor.

15. Studio Azzurro's archive includes a quote for directing and editing the episode using their own equipment. A script of the voiceover, accompanied by detailed notes on the video editing, is also preserved in the artists' archive, along with the master video of the episode.

16. Studio Azzurro's archive holds several documents related to this project, including descriptive materials, a production quote, and the voiceover script. It also preserves a master video of the final documentary.

17. While the compositional scheme of the video installation closely evokes *Due Piramidi* (1984), Studio Azzurro's project proposal for *Pista!* closely echoes the poetics of their contemporary video-theatre pieces—particularly *Prologo* (1984) and *La camera astratta* (1987). In all these cases the monitors contained simple images, referring to natural elements or atmospheric phenomena, to create "a magical and quite fairy-tale-like atmosphere" (Studio Azzurro 1986).

A particularly interesting aspect of the *Pista!* installation was its "interactive" function. The artists designed the pyramid to be activated not only by audiences phoning from home, but also by the show's presenters. For example, in the episode aired on March 22, 1986,[18] the hosts' interactions with the installation playfully echoed some of the strategies Studio Azzurro had explored in their video-theatre collaborations with Barberio Corsetti, particularly *Prologo* (1984). In the episode, Nichetti's image laments being "locked inside, almost trapped within the monitor" and thus stripped from his physical presence; on the other hand, his co-conductor Daniela Goggi goes on to describe Studio Azzurro's video installation as "extremely dangerous", as it remixed images of her body—broadcast from three synchronized monitors staked on top of each other—with that of Orsetta Gregoretti. These scenes were staged as a double-layered performance: while the main stage featured the live presenters, they also interacted with pre-recorded footage of themselves or of their colleagues displayed by the monitors on set.[19] Thus, monitors not only alienated the presenters from their own bodies, but also denied them control over their televised images, creating a total short-circuit with reality. This, for instance, was humorously captured by Gregoretti protesting: "Maurizio, they're breaking me up! I don't want to be in pieces, please!".[20] While the tone remained light and self-ironic, the sequence effectively recontextualized experimental formats explored by Studio Azzurro and Barberio Corsetti in their contemporary theatre works within the framework of a family entertainment show. In this sense, their work for *Pista!* reflects the cultural climate of the time: the 1980s, marked by a postmodern logic of appropriation and remediation, which saw the collapse of barriers that had previously separated "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture. Television—and entertainment programming in particular—became a privileged arena for such hybridizations.

Finally, Studio Azzurro's work for *Pista!*—and television more broadly—reveals a meta-discursive dimension that the group would soon begin to set aside. While this self-reflexive approach had been central to earlier projects such as *Facce di Festa*, from the late 1980s onward the collective intentionally moved away from overt self-referentiality, favoring instead a more conceptual and seductive aesthetic. Television, however, remained an exception—a space where such meta-discourses could still be playfully explored.

3.4 Rai Broadcasts of Studio Azzurro's Work: 1989–1999

A different case from Studio Azzurro's commissioned works for Italian national television is represented by several works broadcast by Rai between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, despite not being originally conceived for television. Among these, are the adaptations of Studio Azzurro's video-theatre productions, which were broadcast by both Rai 3 and RaiSat.

In 1989, Rai3 aired an adaptation of *Alexander Nevskij Video*, a musical video-theatre piece where fragments of Sergei Eisenstein's homonymous film (1938) and a live performance of Sergei Prokofiev's Op. 78 created an audiovisual dialogue between music, cinema, and video imagery (Di Marino 2007: 142). Directed by Daniele Abbado and Leonardo Sangiorgi in collaboration with Studio Azzurro, the project was initially staged at the Konzerthaus in Vienna, with Claudio Abbado conducting the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester (Studio Azzurro n.d.a). Studio Azzurro later oversaw its adaptation for Austrian television (ORF) and for Rai 3, translating the live experience into a video-opera for television.

A similar approach was taken for *Che – Cambiare la prosa del mondo* (*Che – Changing the prose of the world*, 1989–1990), a musical video-theatre work dedicated to Ernesto Che Guevara, created for the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and based on a libretto by Luigi Pestalozza. Conceived and directed by Daniele Abbado and Leonardo Sangiorgi, in collaboration with Studio Azzurro, the work involved a collective of composers and was first presented at Teatro Mella in Havana, Cuba, in October 1989. The following year, the

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18. See *Pista!* Episode aired on March 22, 1986: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WU7GaYRu-SI (last accessed 28-03-2025).

19. Even though using pre-recorded footage, this solution evokes the invention of the "double scene" as a distinctive feature of Studio Azzurro and Barberio Corsetti's video-theatre. On this topic see Studio Azzurro and Baberio Corsetti (1988: 11-13), Rosa and Valentini (1995: 53–59), Borgonovo (2024: 115–118).

20. The contrast between the physical presence of the body on stage and its literal and metaphorical deconstruction through TV monitors and the externalized gaze of the camera is a central element in Studio Azzurro and Barberio Corsetti's video-theatre of the 1980s, particularly *Prologo* (1984). On this topic, see Borgonovo (2024).

televised version of the work—produced by Rai 3 and the Italian record label Fonit Cetra—was adapted under the artistic supervision of Studio Azzurro, with cinematography by Giuseppe Baresi.[21]

Later, in 1998, Studio Azzurro oversaw the television adaptation of *Giacomo mio salviamoci* (*My dear Giacomo, let's save ourselves*), another video-theatre piece dedicated to Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. Conceived by composer Giorgio Battistelli and Paolo Rosa, the work featured an interactive stage design with a monumental table acting as the "poet's desk" and brought to life by sound-activated sensors (Studio Azzurro n.d.b; Di Marino 2007: 160). First presented at Teatro Lauro Rossi in Macerata, the piece was adapted for RaiSat, combining newly filmed material with footage from the original stage production.[22] The result was a new version of the work seeking to blend different artistic languages—music, literature, and video—and translate them for television.

In all these cases, Studio Azzurro took direct charge of the television adaptations of their works, ensuring the visual and conceptual integrity of each project. With roots in film, photography, and an extensive background in theatre since the 1980s, this consistent engagement reflects the group's commitment to maintaining control over the translation of their artistic language into different creative mediums, including television.

Beyond these adaptations, as stated by Paolo Rosa in a conversation with Bruno Di Marino (2007: 75), Studio Azzurro also sold the rights of a vast array of documentary and video material to Rai Sat Arte, "when it still existed and bravely attempted to broadcast experimental works of art".[23] Moreover, Rai 3's *Fuori Orario. Cose (mai) viste* (*After Hours. Things – Never – Seen*) dedicated an entire episode to Studio Azzurro on June 5, 1993, presenting a "collage" of video documentations of their installations and video-theatre works. Curated by film critic Enrico Ghezzi, this late-night program acted as an "anarchic container of images", showcasing Italian and international films, together with other "cinematic gems, artifacts mysteriously rescued from oblivion, and single-theme film marathons" (Grasso 2004: 479).

4   Studio Azzurro's Unrealised Projects for Rai

4.1   Video Installations as "Immersive" Set Designs

In addition to the works produced by, conceived, or adapted for Italian television, Studio Azzurro's archive also holds documentation of several projects for Rai that were never realized. Evidence of these proposals survives in a series of documents, notes, and sketches, which preserve some of the most innovative and radical ideas ever submitted by the artists to the national broadcaster. A first group of projects falls under the category of set designs conceived by Studio Azzurro as complex video installations working as spectacular scenographies for various TV shows.

The first and perhaps most evocative example in this sense is a set design conceived in 1987 for an unspecified program to be hosted by journalist and writer Andrea Barbato. As documented in an illustrated project description, the set was imagined as a true theatrical scene: a space symbolically described as a "blank television screen" (Rosa 1987: 4), torn open by a rip, or a fissure allowing the viewers' gaze to metaphorically reach be-

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21.   Specific references to this work and its television adaptation are scarce in the existing literature on the subject. Several websites mention the piece, listing its composers—Mauro Bagella, Francesco Galante, Giovanna Marini, Serena Tamburini, and Nicola Sani—alongside Pestalozza, the librettist and director Daniele Abbado, as well as Rai 3 and Fonit Cetra as producers. Studio Azzurro's involvement has been reconstructed through conversations with the artists and is supported by archival documents. The artists' archive preserves a project description outlining the artistic choices behind the project; an initial production estimate, which also proposes the creation of a documentary on the project; and a final letter from Rai 3 representatives addressed to Studio Azzurro, formally approving the project and budget proposal. A reference to the work as part of Studio Azzurro's productions is also included in a 1992 list of programs and bibliography, available online at *REWIND Artists' Video* (n.d.).

22.   Studio Azzurro's archive preserves a budget estimate for the staging and television adaptation of the work, the details of which were discussed in conversation with the artists.

23.   RaiSat Arte was a thematic satellite channel created by Rai as an evolution of Rai Sat 1. It operated briefly between 1999 and 2003, broadcasting independent documentaries and works by Italian and international video artists (Lischi 2023: 57–58). Administrative documents from Studio Azzurro's archive confirm Rai's acquisition of reproduction rights for a large video catalog in 1999; however, they do not include a detailed list of titles or specify their intended broadcast use, making it difficult to reconstruct the full catalog of Studio Azzurro's works acquired by RaiSat Arte.

yond the television set. "Television looks into itself"—reads a handwritten note by Paolo Rosa (1987: 4) next to a drawing of two hands lifting a paper strip (Fig. 2). At the center of this set the artists imagined a "multiscreen" (Rosa 1987: 1) made of several monitors tilted at an extreme angle, recalling the shape of the folded paper strip. This structure creates and opening revealing a mirrored surface designed to "straighten" the images, transmitted upside-down by the multiscreen (Fig. 2). "The apparent coldness of the entire apparatus,"—reads the same note by Rosa (1987: 2)—"should actually vanish within the overall atmosphere of the broadcast", envisioned as teeming with people gathered around the fissure—described as an "excavation site around an archaeological discovery". The reflective surface was intended to metaphorically free the image from "the container that produced it" and evoke an "undefined space" (Rosa 1987: 3).
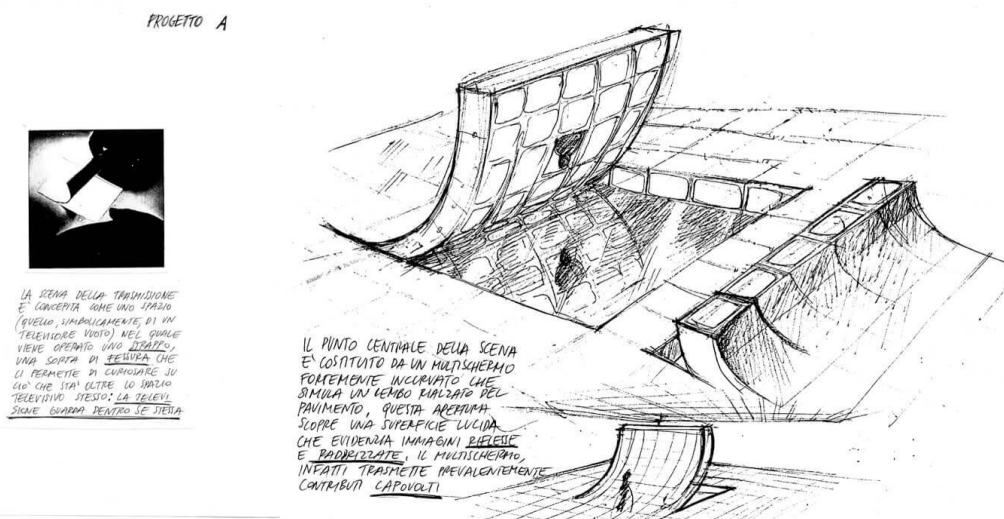

Fig. 2. – Studio Azzurro, Sketches of the set design for Andrea Barbato's television program. Drawings and notes by Paolo Rosa. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.

Though never realized in this form, the idea of a multiscreen shaped as a curved page resurfaced in a scenography designed (and built) by Studio Azzurro for the second edition of the *GrandPrix Pubblicità Italia*, an advertising contest, aired on Tele Monte Carlo (TMC) in 1990.[24] In this iteration, the page-like multi-screen no longer rose above an imaginary fissure but rather plunged into an actual opening in the stage (Fig. 3).

The following year, in 1988, Studio Azzurro developed other set designs proposals that were sent via fax to director Maurizio Fusco, journalist Nino Criscenti, and Elio Andalò Vimercati, then the new executive at the production and distribution company Softvideo s.r.l. Two different fax exchanges are preserved in the artists' archive. In the first, dated November 1988, Rosa (1988a) outlines a proposal for an unspecified television show, accompanied by a few sketches. One month later, a new proposal (Rosa 1988b) was sent to Fusco and Andalò Vimercati, this time specifying the program's title—*Duello* (*Duel*)—and its intended broadcaster, Rai 3. Studio Azzurro's initial idea was quite simple: a video installation composed of "four or five aligned televisions set at an angle" (Rosa 1988a: 1) with synchronized video images falling vertically, as though pulled down by gravity (Fig. 4)—a solution reminiscent of their contemporary videoenvironment *Rilievo della parte emersa* (*Relief of the Emerged Part*, 1988).

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24. The footage of the event, as broadcasted by TMC in 1990, is preserved in Studio Azzurro's archive.
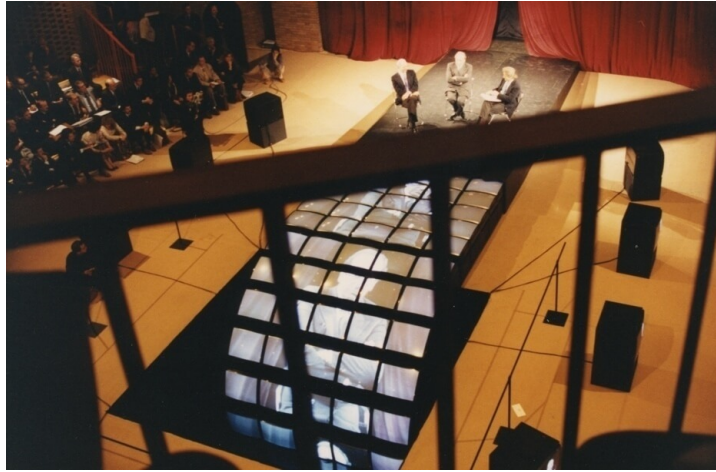
Fig. 3. – Studio Azzurro, Set design for the second edition of *GrandPrix Pubblicità Italia*, aired by TMC, 1990. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.
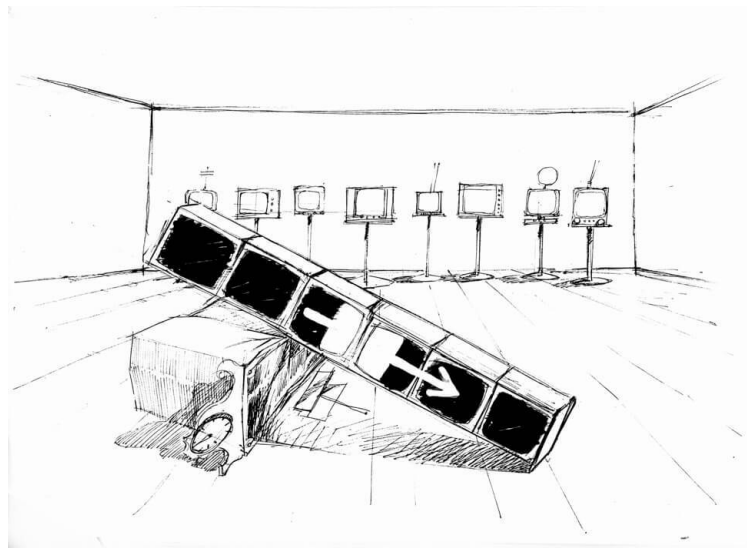

Fig. 4. – Studio Azzurro, Set design sketch for *Duello*, November 1988. Drawing by Paolo Rosa. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.

This concept gave way to more elaborate alternatives presented in December 1988, better suited to the spectacular aesthetics likely demanded by the game-show format of *Duello*. One design envisioned a large, suspended ring of televisions with scrolling synchronized images, four large chroma key backdrops, and other monitors marking contestants' stations (Fig. 5a). A second scenario featured "mega-screen modules" (Rosa 1988b: 4) arranged at three corners of a chroma key rectangular floor (Fig. 5b). A third and final option included a large transparent screen acting as a divide between contestants, which could transform into a massive "video-fresco or video-game-like projection" (Rosa 1988b: 5), where multiple video signals could be overlaid (Fig. 5c).
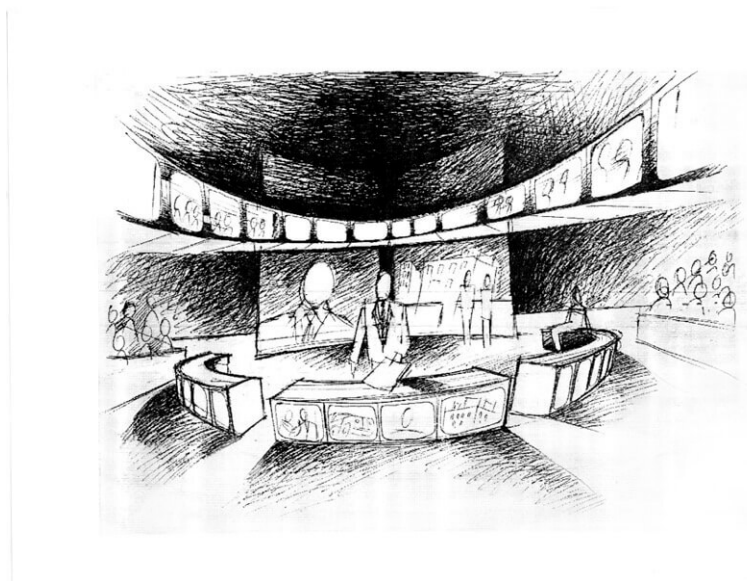

Fig. 5a. – Studio Azzurro, Set design sketch for *Duello*, Proposal A, December 1998. Drawing by Leonardo Sangiorgi. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.
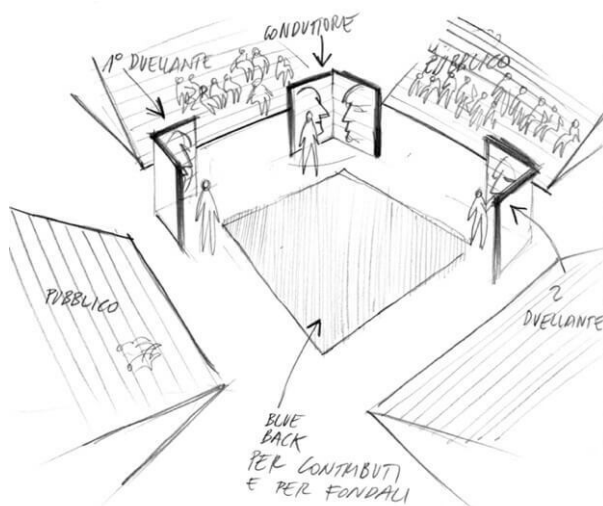

Fig. 5b. – Studio Azzurro, Set design sketch for *Duello*, Proposal B, December 1998. Drawing by Paolo Rosa. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.
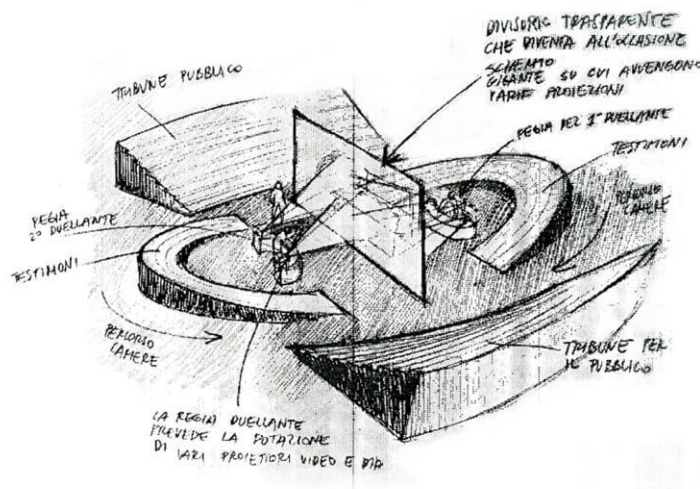
Fig. 5c. – Studio Azzurro, Set design sketch for *Duello*, Proposal C, December 1998. Drawing by Paolo Rosa. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.

Finally, the last unrealized television scenography preserved in the artists' archive is a proposal developed in 2000 for a new, unnamed program to be hosted by journalist Michele Santoro (Studio Azzurro 2000). The project description, drafted after a meeting in Rome between the artists, Santoro, and producer Andrea Soldani, envisioned a circular screen composed of eight synchronized video projectors, individual stations for key "characters" in the show, and a horizontal central screen. The circular screen was designed for flexible activation, allowing the projection of various contributions and immersive scenarios, using synchronized video programs. Unfortunately, no drawings survive to help visualize the potential outcome of this never-produced project. Nonetheless, it clearly aimed at creating a great visual impact.

What connects these various unrealized set designs is the attempt to reconcile the spectacular demands of television with Studio Azzurro's distinctive visual language. These—often daring—proposals sought to free the electronic image from the monitor's frame—as explicitly stated in the project for Barbato's show (Rosa 1987: 3)—allowing video to interact with objects and people on set, which was conceived almost as a theatrical "scene". The idea of a flow of images moving through and beyond the screen, generating a short-circuit between reality and imagination, is a hallmark of Studio Azzurro's work. It reflects a desire to create an encounter between the electronic image and the viewer—an impulse that defines the collective's video-theatrical productions and characterizes videoenvironments as an artistic format.

The reasons for the rejection of such projects are not documented in the archive but can be easily assumed. On one hand, cost concerns may have played a role, given the technically and financially demanding nature of the proposed designs. However, it is worth noting that the artists had the technical expertise, and, in many cases, even the equipment needed to realize such project, as often specified in their proposals (Rosa 1988a: 1; Studio Azzurro 2000). Therefore, other factors were likely at play. For instance, some concerns might have been connected to the overwhelming presence of such "invasive" set designs, which may have been considered too visually or technically complex. Perhaps Rai's producers (or the TV hosts themselves) feared that such spectacular and immersive set designs could somehow "steal the spotlight".

4.2 Unrealised Artistic Incursions: *Video Club* and the *Domestic Video Installation*

To conclude, Studio Azzurro's archive preserves project descriptions and drawings related to two additional, projects conceived for Italian television, but never produced by Rai, or any other broadcaster. Both projects represent deliberate artistic interventions that aimed at challenging the boundaries of the television medium envisioning unprecedented creative uses.

A first case consists in a project conceived in 1988 as a proposal for a new periodic television program titled *Video Club*, intended to explore what Studio Azzurro (1988: 1) described as the "unfathomable margins" of Italian television. The artists envisioned a program in two parts: a first thirty-minute segment to be aired in the late evening would present trailers and previews of content scheduled for later broadcast; the second part, airing during night hours, was conceived as a vast catalogue of "images to be stolen," aimed at "an audience of videotape recorders" (Studio Azzurro 1988: 1). Of particular interest is the description of the materials envisioned for this late-night segment. The content was to include international television productions unavailable in Italy, short films, and commissioned works such as "auteur" documentaries and non-Western films in their original languages with subtitles. The list also included international video art—specifically those works considered impossible to broadcast in Italy—as well as material from historical avant-gardes (from Duchamp to Warhol) and neo-avant-gardes of the 1970s and 1980s, across fields including music, dance, and theater.

While this description bears some resemblance to *Fuori Orario* as re-thought by Enrico Ghezzi since the summer of the following year (1989), *Video Club* was particularly innovative in imagining original content produced specifically for the show, under the artistic direction of Studio Azzurro. Moreover, although the title suggested a preference for video as a medium, the artists did not conceive the program only to please a niche audience of cinephiles and art historians. On one hand, Studio Azzurro suggested producing new television series commissioned to young experimental artists from the fields of theater, music, dance, and independent cinema. On the other, they also proposed broadcasting computer-graphic animations and short animated films using such "synthetic images"—works that had minimal circulation in Italy at the time. The project also proposed a showcase of electronic artworks created using the Quarrel Paintbox software. Remarkably, these computer-generated works to be broadcasted on television are described by Studio Azzurro (1988: 3) as artworks "to be collected as one would collect a painting", reiterating the idea of a freely plunderable visual catalogue. In this way, the technical reproducibility of video and computer art was understood by the artists as a means of democratizing access to contemporary art, enabling new forms of collecting accessible to anyone in possession of a VCR. Therefore, unlike Ghezzi's *Fuori Orario*, which aired in the same years, *Video Club* was conceived to initiate a virtuous circuit—from production to distribution—through which television could serve as a platform for the diffusion of contemporary art, operating outside (and in opposition) to commercial and institutional channels.

The other, even more radical, proposal was developed by the artists a year earlier, in 1987 and consisted of a project for a *Domestic Video Installation* (Fig. 6). It was linked to a short television broadcast—never produced—and submitted to Rai for potential airing as part of an unspecified educational program. Visionary in nature, the project imagined a "montage kit distributed via airwaves" (Studio Azzurro 1987: 1), enabling the realization of a DIY video installation for a domestic setting. Emphasizing television's ability to establish a relationship with its surrounding environment, with this project the artists intended to highlight the creative potential of the television medium, envisioning a creative use that would be accessible to all.
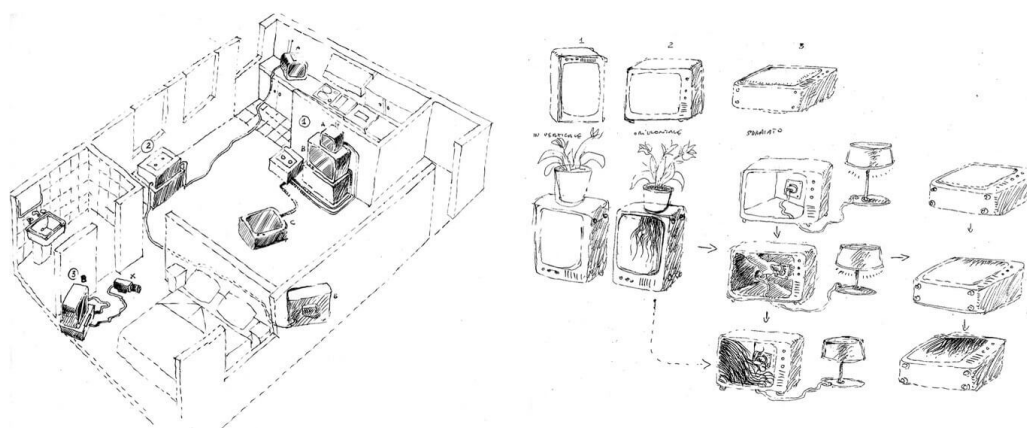

Fig. 6. – Studio Azzurro, Sketches for *Domestic Video Installation*: proposed setup within a home interior (left) and possible modes of activation (right), 1987. Drawings by Leonardo Sangiorgi. Courtesy Archivio Studio Azzurro.

The proposal consisted in an invitation to creatively intervene on everyday devices, such as television sets and VCRs, already widespread in Italian homes at the time. The idea was to transform the TV from a passive mass communication medium into a component of an installation, allowing for active participation in the creative process. Hence, the installation was described as "domestic": self-made in a familiar setting, the house. It was intended as a fully-fledged artwork, a true ready-made, that could be created outside the artist's studio and was not destined to a white cube setting.

The artists' role in this process resembled that of artistic directors. Through a short television segment, approximately eight minutes long, they would provide the basic guidelines for the general public to understand the notion of video installation and make one at home. As stated in the project description, Studio Azzurro (1987: 1) intended this operation "not only as a playful exercise, but above all as a project of artistic and creative signification". The broadcast itself was envisioned as a short artist's video, illustrating in narrative form the various stages of creation.[25] After an introductory segment, the program would describe the planning phase (including spatial delimitation and image capture) and transmit two or three "modules"—simple images and sequences referring to common, everyday gestures and situations. These modules would offer materials "ready to use" for spatial montage and thus relieve the viewer of the need to shoot footage themselves—though this option remained encouraged. Notably, the final segment of the broadcast would document a completed version of the installation assembled in a domestic setting. While this had a main demonstrative function, it also acted as an invitation for viewers to undertake an act of self-documentation—an aspect that closely aligns with Studio Azzurro's creative process in which (self-)documentation is considered an artistic gesture in itself.

Both *Video Club* and the *Domestic Video Installation* proposed creative ways of engaging with television broadcasts as images to be captured or "stolen". *Video Club* aimed to offer a selection of freely accessible content, following a postmodern logic of appropriation and remix—brilliantly exemplified by the contemporary program *Blob* (1989–). The *Domestic Video Installation*, while similarly enabling the hacking of broadcast content, introduced an additional layer: by encouraging viewers to point a video recorder at their domestic surroundings and even document their own everyday actions it fostered a critical attitude that can be seen as a legacy of 1970s. In this sense, both projects can be regarded as Studio Azzurro's (attempted) "incursions" into Rai's television programming. Following Marco Senaldi's (2022: 441) definition, these are moments when an artist intervenes in a television program by "investing or subverting its purposes and forms". It is perhaps precisely this ambition that explains why these projects were never brought to fruition.

5   Conclusion

By investigating the overlooked collaborations between Studio Azzurro and Rai, this paper highlights how the artists' archive can offer critical insights into a missing chapter of Italian television history—one in which contemporary artists contributed not only technical expertise but also creative vision. Through the analysis of both realized and unrealized projects, it introduces a series of unpublished materials that partly challenge dominant narratives about the receptivity of Italian television towards artistic contributions during the 1980s and 1990s.

Beyond their historical and cultural value, the examined archival materials, support two key conclusions. On one hand, the produced projects seem to confirm Rai's tendency to relegate artists to "service" roles within the system of national broadcasting. Yet, they also reflect Studio Azzurro's initial interest in television, and their willingness to translate their artistic language into new formats, compatible with the new medium. On the other hand, the numerous unrealized proposals—ranging from immersive set designs to new original formats like *Video Club* and the *Domestic Video Installation*—underscore the limited openness of Italian television to more experimental artistic "incursions". These proposals, often conceptually ambitious and materially complex, envisioned television as a space for creation, distribution, and democratized access to contemporary art. Thus, their rejection suggests a persistent boundary: artists could be included in the television system only insofar as their proposals did not significantly disrupt its visual grammar or production logics. Perhaps this is one of the reasons behind Paolo Rosa's disenchanted remark about television, which he ultimately described as "an extraordinary lost opportunity for mankind" (Di Marino 2007: 74).

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25.   A detailed storyboard for the proposed broadcast is preserved in Studio Azzurro's archive.

Therefore, highlighting the relevance of Studio Azzurro's archive in foregrounding these dynamics, this paper further considers and expands existing knowledge on the relationship between contemporary art and mass media at a time of intense technological and cultural transformation.

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