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FRAMING AND PROMOTING VIDEO ART IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

Marga van Mechelen

In the mid-1980s, video art was about twenty years old,[1] and even though some believe that video art has not yet outgrown its infancy, Rob Perrée, art critic of *Kunstbeeld*, decides to write the first Dutch history on the subject.[2] For Perrée, at the time still an art history student, there is already a past that can be described and understood.[3] It is a courageous undertaking, since the subject is not very popular at the time in the world of Dutch art criticism, although the 1980s were later regarded as the pinnacle of Dutch video art.[4] In 1983, a series of five articles appeared in *Kunstbeeld*. Given his background, yet confirmed in his opinion by the way in which the government and the interested public see video art, Perrée regards video art as part of the visual arts.[5] In those years Perrée, Paul Groot, Cees Strauss and Hans Beerekamp are the only critics who approach video art as a mature form of art.[6] And although the number of critics that grant the medium adult status will grow in the following years, the question will recur quite regularly: Is video art a mature medium and can it compete with other media? The question keeps coming up, from the early days to even after 2000, when a number of well-known critics react extremely critically to the Venice Biennale of 2001, at which a lot of video art is presented.[7]

The difficult relationship between art criticism and video art is at odds with the development of the art practice itself – in 1983, Perrée refers to three generations. Without pretending that this issue has been settled once and for all, our attention will be focussed on the initiatives in the period from 1985 to shortly before 2000, that were aimed at promoting video art and, as such, took the medium seriously. The Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, for example, about which more will be discussed later, is extremely active in the period from 1985 to 1997 in order to bring attention to the quality of Dutch

video art abroad. It is only in around 1996, thanks to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum, that the public and art-critical interest in a broader sense increases and the developments of the now digital 'video' become visible everywhere (see Domeniek Ruyters' contribution in this volume).

This essay deals with questions such as: How did the recognition of video art come about, more specifically in the period from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s? Who and which organisations have contributed to this, but also: What prevented the early appreciation of video art and its substantive development in the Netherlands? Is it possible to make a concise overview of the use of video during this period?

CONTEMPORARY ART

In 1985, Perrée, at the invitation of the recently established Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, gives a presentation of Dutch video art in The Kitchen in New York. He is assisted by Sebastián López and Leonie Bodeving in the development of the concept. In the introduction to the catalogue *Image on the Run: Dutch Video Art of the 80s*, Perrée reflects on the Dutch identity of video art, a subject as problematic as the statement regarding 'the maturity' of video art. At the Rijksdienst, no one is keen to burn their fingers on describing this identity, yet Perrée does not hesitate.[8] He mentions some characteristics and critical generalities of Dutch art, such as an absence of chauvinism, a preference for soundness over originality and, as far as art is concerned, a precedence of expression through images rather than through many beautiful words. More important than these generalities, a number of which have been belied by later developments, are the introductions of the artists and the role he gives artists of foreign origin. He mentions Raúl Marroquín and Michel Cardena, but he could equally well have mentioned Marina Abramović, David Garcia, Nan Hoover, Uwe Laysiepen, Jeffrey Shaw, Elsa Stansfield and Annie Wright. Those introductions present an image of great diversity, confirmed by other sources of that time, but also of a development that is less based on the supposedly intrinsic characteristics of the medium, but rather on the incorporation of others, for example sound-related media. The connection with (cable) television is also strikingly present in the Dutch video art of the previous period. What matters at the time of the exhibition at The Kitchen is the integration of well-known traditional media such as painting, sculpture and various forms of *storytelling* – one of the signs that there is no longer a dominant modernist paradigm.[9]

1   The first use of video by Nam June Paik in the United States is generally seen as the birth of video art. Media art is even older, but is not yet a generally accepted term in the mid-1980s (see the Introduction and Darko Fritz's contribution to this volume).

2   Sander Kletter, *Turbulentie rond videokunst: Kunstkritische reflecties op een nieuw medium 1970–2010* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2016), 267.

3   The earliest art criticism that appears in Kletter 2016 is entitled *Video in de kinderschoenen* (Video in Its Infancy); included is Perrée's criticism entitled *Video, het achterlijke broertje van de televisie* (Video, the Retarded Little Brother of Television), what obviously is not his opinion.

4   Marie-Adèle Rajandream, 'Videokunst,' in Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans, eds., *Vrij spel: Nederlandse kunst 1970–1990* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993), 127–191, here 145.

5   At the time, this was not so obvious for everyone. It is striking that, even later on, in the book *Cultuurbeleid in Nederland*, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2002, media art, including video art, is only mentioned very briefly and moreover in the paragraph dealing with Film and New Media.

6   Paul de Groot in 1982 (review World Wide Video festival, Kletter 2016, 84); Perrée in *Skrien* (Kletter 2016, 125), Cees Strauss in *Trouw* in 1984 (Kletter 2016, 110 note 2) and Hans Beerekamp in 1985 in NRC Handelsblad (Kletter 2016, 35 and 57 note 84). Pauline Terreehorst asked Dorine Mignot this question in 1984, on the occasion of *The Luminous Image*, a large exhibition of video art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The question returns repeatedly (e.g. Kletter 2016, 255), and it is striking that even in 1984 Anne Tilroe still refers to a medium that is still in its infancy (Kletter 2016, 118). For Janneke Wesseling, the time when the medium has come of age is 2003, for Hans den Hartog Jager it is 2009 (Kletter 45, 49, 60 note 146, 254).

7   Kletter, *Turbulentie rond videokunst*, gives a series of examples across many decades.

8   *De Nederlandse identiteit in de kunst na 1945*, ed. Geurt Imanse (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff en Stedelijk Museum, 1984), appeared in 1984, a publication in which the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam participated.

9   In 1995, when *Wild Walls* is presented at the Stedelijk Museum, the compiling authors again refer to narrativity. The interdisciplinary interpretation, however, has been broadened in comparison to ten years earlier (see Domeniek Ruyters' contribution).

Five years later, in 1990, a large presentation of video art is again made possible by the Rijksdienst, be it only at the last moment, since Minister D'Ancona no longer thinks it is the task of the government to show or promote Dutch art abroad.[10] The curator, this time, is René Coelho, founder of MonteVideo. What is immediately noticeable in the title of the exhibition, *Imago, fin de siècle in Dutch contemporary art*, is the fact that the words 'video' or 'media art' are entirely missing. In this exhibition, the curator takes stock of how Dutch art has shaped its 'end of the century reaction'.[11] He compares it with the previous fin de siècle, when 'a strong reaction on industrial developments could be noted'[12]. The exhibition takes place a year after the introduction of the World Wide Web, the consequences of which were barely foreseeable, yet which did hold a promise for the future. Coelho points out that there is, even now, a reaction of art to technological developments, aimed at innovation and new hybrid forms, which, incidentally, does not have to exclude a critical attitude towards technology. In this way, he makes it clear that he does not want to break with the dominant tradition of critical media used by artists in the Netherlands (see Bosma's contribution in this volume). Like Perrée, Coelho resorts to generalities – an attitude that tends to be somewhat provoked by this type of exhibitions. At the same time, he reveals his agenda, which can be understood as: video art is genuine contemporary art. After all, video art is the art form par excellence that integrates with the technology of the time. What he could not know, then, was that video art would soon be overtaken by other forms of media art. Despite the title, the exhibition and his introduction to the catalogue ignore other contemporary art forms that, like it or not, grab most of the attention elsewhere. Clever use is made of the missionary urge of the two most important representatives of the Rijksdienst, Robert de Haas and Gijs van Tuyl, to showcase the contemporary and international character of the media art field. Which is why his selection of fourteen artists includes both established and new names. Stansfield / Hooykaas, Bert Schutter and Jeffrey Shaw belong to the first category. Boris Gerrits, Ricardo Fuglisthaler, Pieter Baan Müller, Servaas, Lydia Schouten, René Reitzema, Roos Theuws, Giny Vos and Peter Zegveld actually belong to this category as well, but they only come to the fore in the 1980s.[13] Relatively new names are Nol de Koning and Bill Spinhoven; they are too young to have worked with the 'old' new media. Four of them were previously presented in *Image on the Run* (Servaas, Schouten, Stansfield / Hooykaas and Theuws). Interactive work is well represented. Two major international exhibitions on media art in a period of five years is significant, although it must be said that half of the Rijksdienst's budget was dedicated to contemporary art, twice as much as for modern art and ancient art. This effort was further enhanced by the existing international contacts that the Rijksdienst had access to.

Seven years later, Coelho was again commissioned by the Stedelijk Museum, with which he collaborated to present what is now called Dutch *media* art, consisting solely of installations and with a marked space for computer and Internet work. There are some familiar names, but most are new: Kees Aafjes, Peter Bogers, Jaap de Jonge, A. P. Komen, Fiona Tan, Bea de Visser and Christiaan Zwanikken. The exhibition is called *The Second* and focusses on 'time'.[14]

POPULAR VIDEO ART

The division that Coelho tries to make between contemporary video art and other visual art is debatable, but it appeals to everyone interested in the new media. It is a dynamic and multifaceted field that not only has been keeping pace with technological developments for several decades, but that also wants to embody progressive postmodernism, which is expressed through an open attitude towards society and all art forms. Coelho presents a self-assured attitude, more so than Perrée who has pondered numerous times why video art had such a hard time finding acceptance in the Netherlands, and concludes with the bold proposition that the Dutch are more appreciative of foreign work than of their own creations, which is, like any generalisation, a questionable statement. However, it is striking that the attention of the larger art institutions as well as the art critics in these decades is primarily focused on a few big foreign names in video art. This started in 1973 when the Van Abbemuseum gave Bruce Nauman an important exhibition, or even earlier with Nam June Paik, although his presence at Sonsbeek '71 was hardly noticed.

The 1980s and 1990s have their own celebrities. First in line here is Bill Viola, followed in the 1990s by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist. What was it in the work of these artists that appealed to both public and critics alike? In the case of Viola, it was, in short, the advanced, seductive and poetic use of technology, but also his contemplative themes.[15] In the case of Rist, it was the humorous – what we now would call immersive – videos and installations.[16] She show her work for the first time at the Amsterdam gallery AKINCI in 1994; a year later she attracts the attention in *Wild Walls* (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1995). She owes her popularity to the press, but also rides the new feminist wave. Another American popular in the Netherlands is Tony Oursler.[17] He is probably first presented in the Netherlands at the 1986 World Wide Video Festival with his video installation

10 Helen Cioni, 'Nederlandse kunst over de grenzen: Een vergelijkend onderzoek naar de presentatie van Nederlandse kunst in het buitenland door de Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst en een drietal kunstmusea', PhD diss. (University of Amsterdam, 1993), 38.

11 René Coelho et al., eds., *Imago: Fin de Siècle in Dutch Contemporary Art: Catalogue of the Exhibition* (Amsterdam: Stichting MonteVideo and *Mediamatic Magazine*, 1990), 11. The catalogue appears as a double issue of *Mediamatic Magazine*, which is remarkable since Willem Velthoven, who is one of the editors of the catalogue, published a critical article about video art a year earlier, which can be seen as his break with the domain of video art. One year earlier, it appears from a report written by Ernie Tee on behalf of the Rijksoverheid (National Government) that the term media art is preferred to video art (see chapter 4: Institutional and Other Platforms).

12 Coelho 1990, 11.

13 Gerrits is somewhat of an exception in this story. He started his career in the 1970s and became better known for his documentary films later on.

14 Boris Gerrits, Pieter Baan Müller, Bert Schutter, Bill Spinhoven and Steina also participated. The latter had not taken part in *Imago*, nor could she be considered as part of a new generation of Dutch artists.

15 In her review of the World Wide Video Festival of 1984 (see Pauline Terreehorst, 'Verhaal steeds meer de basis van videotape: Festivals en manifestaties schetsen ontwikkeling', *de Volkskrant*, 1 September 1984), Terreehorst mentions Viola as one of the most interesting artists of that moment. He is presented at the festival but also in *The Luminous Image*, an international exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam that takes place simultaneously.

16 Particularly art critic and editor of the *NRC Handelsblad* Sandra Smallenburg, who graduated in 1996 with a thesis on video art by female artists (Kletter 2016, 41), takes a special interest in her work.

17 In 2001, I organised a symposium with students from the University of Amsterdam in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam with the telling title *Faces of Laughter: Female Strategies in Art*, in which Rist was invited as main guest.

Spheres d'influence (1985), although the appreciation for his work only comes later.[18] The attention for foreign artists increased especially over the course of the 1990s. If in the 1980s there are still a few German artists of interest, such as Marcel Odenbach, Ulrike Rosenbach and Klaus vom Bruch, the focus is now mainly turned to Americans and Britons: Matthew Barney, Douglas Gordon, Gary Hill, Steve McQueen and Georgina Starr. Closer to home we find David Claerbout, but this is already after the beginning of the new millennium. These foreign artists set the tone; they determine the standard of video art, definitely after the presentation of works at Documenta IX (1992). At the same time, they are remarkably often commented upon by Dutch critics. Narrativity in video art appears to be a sensitive point.[19] For a long time it was absent (or, should we say, suppressed?) in Dutch media art, but it is, considering the character of foreign video art, ultimately impossible to ignore; something Terreehorst and Perrée have been advocating since the middle of the 1980s. Yet the narrative element should not become too overbearing, it should not detract from the visual expression. Perhaps this explains the early appreciation for the Dutch artist Marijke van Warmerdam, who already stands out in 1995 with various looped 16mm films or VHS tapes, such as *Voetbal* (1995), or Aernout Mik, whose first large solo exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum (2000) five years later immediately caused furore. These artists are not only from a different generation than the artists presented in the two aforementioned Rijksdienst exhibitions, they also operate in a different environment, often a museum setting, an environment that falls more readily under the scope of art critics.

THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF VIDEO

What distinguishes the video art in the 1980s from that in the 1990s? Not the loop, the video installation or videographics, because all this dates, together with the multi-channel projection, from long before 1985. Video sculpture is something new, not so much its appearance as its name. It is added to the already existing list of compound words that have come to constitute the family of video art and, together, interconnect with other disciplines. The video sculpture is seen as the preeminent exponent of the postmodern art of the time, certainly after Belgian artist Marie-Jo Lafontaine catches the attention in 1987 with her *Les larmes d'acier* (1985) at Documenta 8 in Kassel.[20] Stacking monitors on top of each other or putting together a wall of monitors is nothing new. In the Netherlands it was seen before in *Memory Window* by Stansfield/Hooykaas,

an installation from 1977 and in Bert Schutters' *Mill X Molen* (1982), consisting of twelve monitors that form four windmill blades.[21] The name 'video sculpture' appears in 1983, in the work of Roel Faassen, which clearly inscribes itself in the more abstract tradition of Dutch (video) art. In *Les larmes d'acier*, however, form and content are brought together in an entirely new way. Once again, it is an installation by a foreign artist that takes on an exemplary function. Its content is complex – it deals with testing the pain threshold during strength training and evokes homoerotic and sadomasochistic associations, yet also thematises 'the iron tears' associated with the Second World War. The stack of monitors fed by six video tracks reinforces the substantive concept. This basic idea of 'how can video – with all its new technological possibilities – tell a personal yet also general story?' becomes increasingly more prevalent in the 1980s. Well-known Dutch examples in this respect are the works of Lydia Schouten.[22] Her oldest videos are recordings of performances, such as *Breaking through the Circle* (1978) and *Kooi* (1978), in which femininity is thematised on a very personal level, while her videos from 1981 onwards deal with media perceptions in a parodying and later ever more imaginative manner, as in *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1985). The striking 'video films' by Vijselaar & Sixma also date from the mid-1980s, in which they magnify the stereotypical image of Arab culture (*La Rose Blanche*, 1988) in a kitschy, theatrical setting. In the 1990s, Reinier Kurpershoek and Ron Sluik present storytelling in an entirely different manner. These artists – who have been collaborating since the early 1980s, at which time they mainly made spatial work – rediscover the quality of video as a means for storytelling other than film. Their video collages, which sometimes include *found footage*, anticipate the post-1997 video art.

Quite unnoticed, video art became a container concept that primarily started to lead a life of its own in the museum world and in the fringes of contemporary art exhibitions, biennials, etc. It includes the presentation of the videotape, the video sculpture, the video installation, analogue or digital, without necessarily bringing to the fore the technology as such or its connection with media art in a broader sense. This decade is marked by an exponential development, which could in essence be linked to digitisation, but which has more to do with the introduction in exhibition spaces of the video projector with which large wall-filling projections in or outside a black box can be realised in a relatively simple way. It is a subject in itself: the *white cube* that makes room for the *black box*. True, more room is made for video art; the integration with other forms of contemporary art which the curators of *Wild Walls* had already pointed to, is indeed continued.

18 Kletter 2016, 110.
19 In the second half of the 1990s there is an abundance of video and media art exhibitions. *Kunst met een stekker* (Art with a Plug) is a well-known example. The Van Abbemuseum presents a dozen exhibitions, the most famous of which is undoubtedly *Cinéma Cinéma* held in 1999 (Kletter 2016, 37).

20 Noortje Smit, 'Zien en gezien worden: De functie van drie festivals voor audiovisuele kunst,' Master's thesis (University of Amsterdam, 2001).

21 Marga van Mechelen, *De Appel: Performances, Installations, Video, Projects, 1975–1983* (Amsterdam: Stichting De Appel, 2006), 294–295.

22 This certainly does not only apply to the Netherlands. Michael Rush, in his well-known book *New Media in Late 20th-Century Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), mentions countless similar examples.

This is, ironically, thanks in part to the video sculpture that turns out to be rather more marketable than the videotape. Old tapes from the 1970s are even given a second life as part of video sculptures. Also video installations have become prevalent. This rapid acceptance of a decade earlier has on the one hand to do with its link with the *environment* of the 1960s; on the other hand, as Peter Weibel notes, it catered to the hunger for images of those years, which, looking at the installations of the later quite popular Melanie Bonajo, never completely disappeared. 23 Almost thirty years after its introduction, the use of the video projector is still decisive for the presentation of video art in museums, used for one or multi-channel projections directly on the wall, the floor or on any object whatsoever.

Art form and technology are one thing, yet no less important, and of an entirely different order, is content. Thanks to video art, the outside world has penetrated the art space to an ever greater extent. Particularly in those instances where engagement touches upon this reality, video art reminds us of what Walter Benjamin once called the technique and tendency of *montage*. Montage, as a technique but also as an explicit vision of reality, has been given a current interpretation. 24

23 Interview with Weibel in Arjen Mulder and Maaike Post,
   Boek voor de elektronische kunst (Amsterdam and Rotterdam:
   De Balie and V2_, 2000), 59.
24 For Benjamin, tendency implies the right (political) content
   or objective.

▲ Top

Christiaan Bastiaans NL, 1983
Jukai (the sea of trees)
1983, video, colour, sound, 14'34''

Jukai, Japanese for 'sea of trees', is part of a project entitled *The Jungle of Sentiments*. Jukai is also the name of a forest in Japan known as the forest of suicides. In the video we see a young woman wandering quietly through an abandoned house, a man is present but only as a projection. His image is accompanied by tropical forest sounds. The man and the woman refer to the Japanese story of Yokutu, in which a young couple commits suicide, an act for which they seem to be predestined. In the video one can also hear the voice of Yukio Mishima, the Japanese writer who will commit suicide not long after this recording. The threat is made tangible at the end through the images of a knife and a samurai, both signs of fate.
Source: li-ma.nl, museen-sh.de

▼ Bottom

Pieter Baan Müller NL, 1957
Maracaïbo, Ships that Pass in the Night
1995, installation consisting of three computer monitors on a base

Three colour planes on three monitors form the basis of the installation. They are accompanied by the obvious pounding sound of an engine, which can be identified, in combination with the title, as the sound of a ship's engine room. The triangular red shape that moves over the light and dark part on the middle monitor also refers to the title. The white flashes of light are those of the Maracaibo lighthouse; Müller captured them for his father when he was still a sailor. The installation was made for the 1996 travelling exhibition *The Second: Time Based Arts from the Netherlands*, curated by René Coelho and presented in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1997.
Source: li-ma.nl
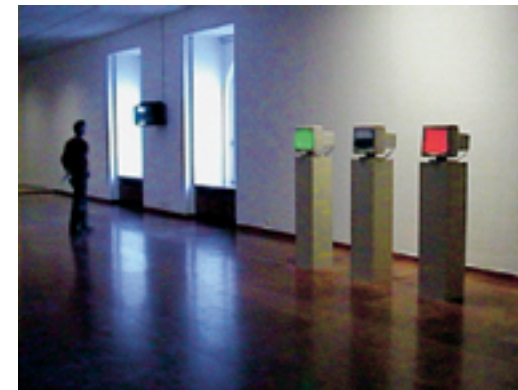
Peter Bogers NL, 1956
Heaven
1995, installation, 7-channel video
(black / white), 11 audio channels

Heaven, which exists in multiple versions,
refers to the title of *The Second,* the
1996 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam, for which it was created. The
recordings on which the video images are
based do not last longer than a second.
They are played back and forth, in endless
repetition, as is the sound.

The rhythms of the images and sounds are
synchronous with each other. The images
are familiar, such as for instance the bow
of a contrabass or a baby being breast-fed.
At the same time, they are all shown
separately, even if their position imaginarily
connects them with reality. Because of this,
the image of a clock or furniture shifting
due to an earthquake ultimately has
a disturbing effect. For a second, time
has collapsed.

Stansfield / Hooykaas
Madelon Hooykaas NL, 1942
Elsa Stansfield UK, 1945 – NL, 2004
Radiant, a personal observatory
1988 – 1989, video sculpture consisting of
a video monitor and an aluminium satellite
disk on a tripod with slate underneath

The work of Stansfield / Hooykaas revolves
around a play with time (the relativity and
simultaneity of time) as well as the power
and structure of memory.

The video monitor of *Radiant: A Personal
Observatory* displays slow-moving, hazy
images that seem to emerge from far away.
Also regularly appearing on the screen
is a letter 'S', the letter which Guglielmo
Marconi, the inventor of the radio, used
in 1901 to send a message across the ocean
('s' was the first letter to be telegraphed).
The letters encourage the viewer to pick
up signals from a distant past with the
help of the super-sensitive satellite disc.

Roos Theuws NL, 1957
Forma Lucis VI (Part II)
1989, installation with two monitors
and pieces of glass in a darkened room

The works in the *FORMA LUCIS* series,
including *No. VI*, question the phenomena
of light: whether light is form or whether
it gives form. All *FORMA LUCIS* works make
use of the monitor as light- emanating
source, and have (wooden) sculptural
objects built around them. The video data
are non-referential as they are recordings
of the coloured monitor screen itself.
In the case of *FORMA LUCIS VI (Part II)*,
an installation for two boxes, hanging at
eye-height on the wall, colour- and surface
processed, diffusing glass plates are used.
Because the object parts reflect and / or
absorb that electronic light, they enhance
the ultimate goal, i.e. mixing electronic and
analogue light in a sculptural, enchanting
manner. It fills the space between viewer
and installation with travels of light
and makes that space almost tangible;
the viewer experiences a process
of dematerialisation.
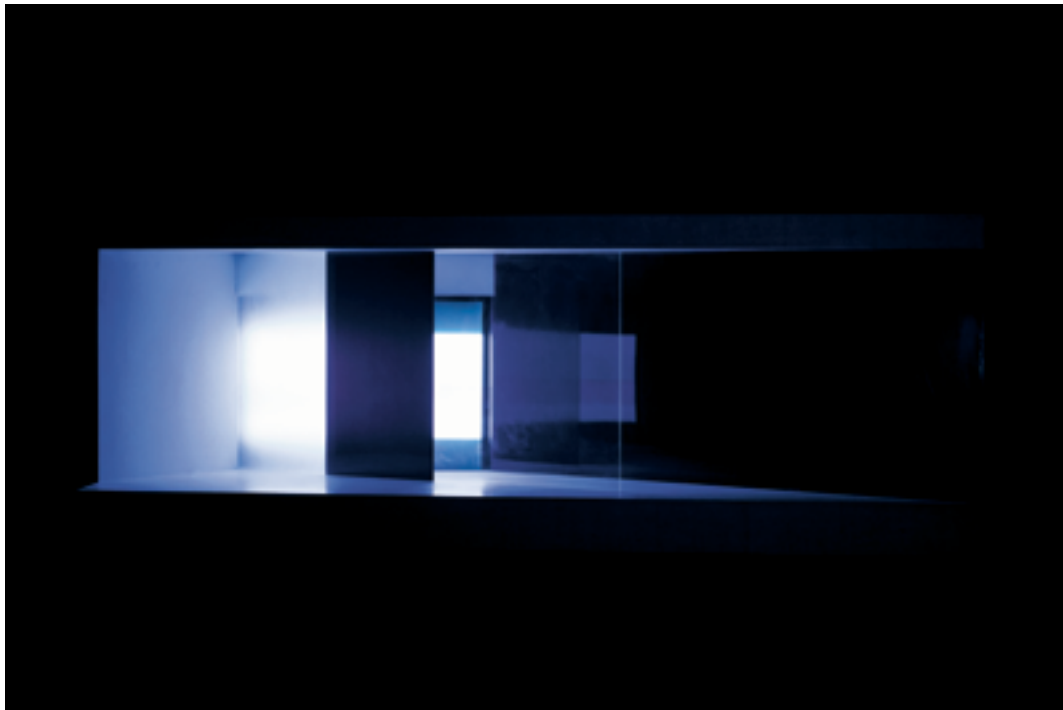
Lydia Schouten NL, 1948
A Virus of Sadness
1990, multimedia installation,
600 x 800 x 400 cm

A video projection can be seen on the floor
in the centre of the installation. Next to the
projection are two Art Deco armchairs with
monitors showing video personal ads. In
this installation, Schouten thematises the
loneliness of metropolitan life and the often
horrible images that were forced upon her
by the city and by television, in particular
the six o'clock news. That is the source
of the six photos of murderers on the
turquoise-coloured walls, photos which
could just as easily represent victims.
Their faces reveal nothing. There is also,
among other things, a photo of a boy next
to a building, which is accompanied
by the enigmatic caption: 'I Put my Arms
around Her and Pinned Her to the Building'.
The installation was created after a stay
in New York.