

Ans Westra

A Life In
Photography
Paul Moon



Ans Westra

A Life In
Photography
Paul Moon



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Arrival 7

1. Origins 11

2. The Family of Man 20

3. Te Ao Hou: The New World 29

4. The Friendly Islands 58

5. Whitewash? 69

6. Good Keen Men 91

7. The Country I Live In 122

8. Close to Home 153

9. The Thick of It 169

10. Retrospection 201

11. Broken Ends 240

Departure 271

Notes 274

Bibliography 298

Glossary 313

Acknowledgements 315

Index 318

Arrival

In February 2023 I went to meet Ans Westra at her home in Lower Hutt. As she opened the door, the light from the entrance melted away into a gloom at the end of the narrow hallway. In a courteous, clipped Dutch accent she offered advice about where to step as I followed her inside.

We threaded our way past a plaster elephant head, a Bakelite radio, assorted vases, baskets of firewood, piles of books and files, and floral arrangements in varying states of dehydration towards a couple of old armchairs. She tucked herself into one of them and motioned for me to sit in the other. The pale morning sun slanted through a side window and a mixed fragrance of old paper, worn upholstery and overripe flowers hung in the air.

Almost every space was occupied in this forbidding jungle of bric-a-brac. 'Just things I've picked up over the years,' she said, half apologetically, as she caught me surveying the surrounds.¹

The conversation flowed easily, although there were occasional moments when it slowed to a trickle. Initially we were both poking and prodding to get a sense of each other — cautiously open to the possibility of a rapport developing. She patiently explained some technical aspects of her cameras, and at times was disarmingly candid about her life. As we swapped stories I noticed that even when recounting some of the more challenging episodes from her past she often wore a look of placid resignation rather than regret. Early on, I realised that this was a woman who had not let adverse experiences derail her.

Sometimes when I asked a question she sat in silence, her mind miles away in the past. Then when she opened the aperture on a memory, her head tilted slightly and an almost beatific smile spread across the soft features of her face. But not always. Some memories were clearly difficult — like the outrage that erupted in 1964 following the publication of *Washday at the Pa*.

Occasionally I caught her giving me a sustained, scrutinising stare, looking me up and down as though framing me for a photograph. That was always part of her technique. ‘You always look. You look at what makes a good photo,’ she explained, with a burst of enthusiasm that testified to the almost intoxicating effect the practice of her art had on her. ‘I see something that works. I see an image and I respond to it. I’ve always had that eye. I always recognised the images I wanted to take . . . I don’t do it consciously or try to figure it out. I act instinctively . . . spontaneously . . . You recognise a moment in time.’

Sometimes she missed the moment, ‘but I don’t want to go back and set it up because then it’s artificial’, she said. Her photographs emerged from a process of ‘being quiet, observing people first, being open-minded, non-judgemental and going with the flow’. Authenticity was a maxim throughout her long career. ‘What I was always fighting for was people relaxing, not posing to be photographed. I would try to make them carry on with what they were doing.’ The ultimate purpose of her art remained the same:

. . . to make people see what I see. It’s so often about people’s interaction — their natural responses such as caring. All that comes out in the pictures . . . People can recognise and respond to the special quality. I don’t want to point out what is beautiful or what is evil. I want to point out the reality, and that is what is beautiful really . . . The photos have to explain themselves, and they can’t do this when the people in them are showing off how clever they are or how beautiful they are, or whatever.

At the start of her career, when most professional photographers were churning out studio portraits of society's great and good, along with photographs of weddings and christenings and posed family groups in a production line of stern glares and sweet poses, Ans Westra was drawn to the intriguing tension and candidness of 'ordinary' New Zealanders — a sort of visual documentation of the country's 'real' inhabitants in their natural (if mundane) environment.

Her gift had always been to make the ordinary seem extraordinary. As we talked, I was struck by her sincerity and warmth, though I was aware that not everyone has seen her in this way. I had been cautioned by some (most of whom have never met her) that she could be prickly and stand-offish. This was not my experience. In the past there had been a prolonged and difficult time when her life's work was criticised by some as being culturally inappropriate because she was a Pākehā photographing Māori, and this perhaps engendered an element of defensiveness in some encounters.



THIS BIOGRAPHY, AN ACCOUNT of Ans Westra's life through her eyes, is designed to be a corrective to such misrepresentations of her work. Westra's accomplishments are formidable. Over nearly 70 years she took an estimated 325,000 photographs of aspects of New Zealand life.² Collectively, these are the closest the country has to a national photo album.

Perhaps it was partly because Westra was an immigrant that her eye landed on images and her mind composed scenes of the country and its inhabitants overlooked by locals. Her work also detailed the social anatomy of sections of New Zealand society in ways that eluded other photographers. 'Being from Europe, I was aware of things that seemed different here,' she told me, 'but I didn't deliberately photograph things I thought were different . . . I am curious about all people — why they are, who they are, what they are . . . I want to understand humanity, and when I have taken the right pictures, I understand humanity a bit more.'

She endured more than her fair share of vocal criticism from various quarters, and developed — or perhaps always had — a thick-skinned determination. One longtime friend noted that beneath her quiet demeanour was ‘a kind of toughness . . . almost like a hidden iron rod that isn’t easily put off’.³ A difficult childhood no doubt contributed to that. She tried not to let the criticism get to her. ‘It’s actually very helpful because you get to know the opinion of your work. I’m open to it. But I don’t feel I have to defend my position, or why I took a picture,’ she told me.

Even in what would be her final days, just two months away from turning 87, Westra was refusing to allow the walls of her life to close in. On another visit I found her preparing for her next project — a photographic collection that would focus on children. She had documented thousands of people in photographs, but there would always be many more she hadn’t yet got to . . .

Photography had become a way of having relationships with people. ‘If I’m at a party and I don’t have a camera with me, then I don’t feel comfortable . . . I have to have a purpose, and the purpose to photograph, and through the photographs to get to know the people and to learn,’ she said.⁴

ANS WESTRA DIED WHILE this book was being written. Fortunately a wealth of material, including interview transcripts, meant the work could continue, but in some places the narrative is a bit like a patchwork quilt stitched together from documentary fragments. The end result is a mosaic of her life, largely constructed around her own memories and perceptions. And if some of the mystery of Ans Westra remains? I put this possibility to her just four days before her death. With a dry chuckle and broadening smile, she responded, ‘Good!’

1. Origins

Anna (Ans) Jacoba Westra entered the world on 28 April 1936 in Leiden, the Netherlands—a university town proud of its academic pedigree (Einstein had lectured there just 16 years earlier), and for being the birthplace of the country’s greatest artist, Rembrandt van Rijn. Leiden had also enjoyed a prolonged period of prosperity enabled by being in the orbit of Amsterdam, roughly 50 kilometres north-east.

For centuries, Amsterdam had been at the centre of Dutch mercantilism, but by the opening years of the twentieth century the Golden Age had taken on a more tarnished complexion. With few opportunities at home, Ans’ father, Pieter Westra, travelled to Canada as a teenager, following the well-worn route of those seeking fortunes in what was still regarded in Europe as the New World.

Pieter’s decision to emigrate was no opportunistic whim. Almost two decades earlier, his father, Hans, a Leiden schoolmaster, had decided to move the whole family to Canada. They had got as far as boarding the ship when authorities received medical test results suggesting that Hans might have tuberculosis. It is not difficult to imagine the disappointment the family felt as they were forced to disembark, the dream of a new life across the Atlantic in tatters. Instead of returning to Leiden, the Westras settled in the north of the Netherlands, where Pieter was born shortly after.

Hans had resumed work as a teacher; four years later he died from tuberculosis. Pieter was so distraught that he climbed the little church tower

in the village where they lived 'to try and join him going up to heaven'.¹ Only the timely arrival of the fire brigade delayed his ascension.

At the age of 15, having abandoned formal education, Pieter decided to revive his father's quest by joining another family sailing to Canada. This time, he hoped, a Westra would succeed in reaching the New World. A streak of furtiveness in his character was evident when the ship docked and Pieter offered to take care of all the customs requirements on behalf of the family with whom he was travelling. The father gratefully accepted the offer and handed over all the documentation. This was the last they ever saw of Pieter Westra. Using their papers, and probably posing as one of them, Pieter was now on Canadian soil, and ready to make his fortune.

He soon discovered, however, that the grass was no greener on the other side of the Atlantic. After a year eking out a living in various labouring jobs, drudgery and impoverishment tipped his initial optimism over into despondency. He realised he needed a plan. In the years that followed, he went about establishing a number of businesses from which he squeezed out sufficient profit to send money back to his mother in Leiden.²

But just as he was gaining an economic foothold, the Depression struck. Canada's 'Dirty Thirties', named for the succession of droughts that parched the prairies, exacerbated the effects of the worldwide financial collapse and unemployment surged into the millions. No sector escaped the economic and human catastrophe.³ Pieter decided to cut his losses and return to the Netherlands.

Back in Leiden, in 1932, he met Hendrika van Dorn and the two were soon married. But there were tensions in the relationship from the outset. Both were impulsive individuals, and the ugly tail of the Depression undoubtedly placed strains on the marriage. Shortages and struggle were the norm, and without a trade or profession to fall back on, Pieter once again had to be resourceful.⁴ Thankfully, he had some savings from his Canadian businesses and began manufacturing costume jewellery. Many families were selling off their precious jewellery to make ends meet and there was an appetite for inexpensive replacements.

The venture soon expanded to include the production of leather handbags and suitcases. In partnership with a German businessman, Pieter expanded the enterprise to The Hague (15 kilometres south-west of Leiden), where they opened premises in the main street. He also kept the Leiden shop, and it was behind that shop that Ans Westra was born.

Less than a fortnight after her fourth birthday, Hitler's battalions burst into the Netherlands, and four days later the country capitulated. Luftwaffe planes pummelled Rotterdam (25 kilometres south of Leiden), paratroopers descended from the skies, tanks rumbled through the streets, and thousands of SS and Wehrmacht forces flooded in as the army of occupation.⁵

Westra's memory of this turning point in Dutch history and her own life is vivid:

What was very common in Holland was at the front door a little mirror so the person upstairs could see who was ringing the doorbell. They were illegal and I remember this German knocking on the door and when my mother didn't come quick enough he shot the mirror. I was myself nearly shot. A soldier had been to C&A, the big clothes shop, and had left his bicycle outside, and somebody trying to escape grabbed it and took off. When he found his bicycle gone he came running down our little cobbled street and I was just standing in the door trying to open it coming home from school and I looked in the barrel of the gun, so it went *twooooo* — it just missed me. Mother told me off, she said, 'Why didn't you go across the road where there was an open doorway of the cycle repair place?' I said, 'If I had, I wouldn't be here, Mum.'⁶

Less suspicion was likely to fall on a child than on an adult, and so Ans was enlisted by one of the underground groups opposed to the occupation. At the age of eight, she was helping distribute anti-Nazi material around her neighbourhood, a task that could result in execution or being sent to slave labour in German ammunition factories for any adult caught in the act.

Certain traumatic events inevitably imprinted themselves in the mind of the young Dutch girl. ‘The army rolled in with big tanks, and I saw a small child of about my age going under [a tank]. I said to my mother, “Did you notice that? Do you remember?” I can still see that picture, and she said, “Oh no, that didn’t happen.” But it was all so vivid.’⁷

Pieter continued to do business throughout the war, although the German occupation made it challenging. Circumstances were a bit more financially fraught, but the family was far from the breadline. ‘We had to do what we could, reknitting old cardigans or whatever, to survive, but we never got hungry,’ Ans recalled.⁸ By this time the Nazi occupiers were rounding up Leiden’s Jews and sending them to the death camps. Pieter, not one to let an opportunity go by, bought some of the houses they left behind, presumably at heavily discounted prices. (After the war the Dutch government enacted provisions for restitution, along with retrospective taxes on profits made during the war, and Pieter was caught by this policy.⁹ ‘I remember being in the office room behind the shop with him when this bill came in and it was something like 200,000 guilders [around NZ\$1.2 million],’ Ans recalled. ‘I saw him turn green with shock.’)¹⁰

BOTH PIETER AND HENDRIKA were unfaithful to each other during this period. Pieter often travelled away from home and had affairs to which Hendrika mostly resigned herself. Then she herself became pregnant to an older man and had an abortion that nearly killed her. There could be no more children and Ans was to remain an only child. In Ans’ words, ‘The only one. The precious only one.’¹¹

By 1947, when Ans was 11, her parents’ marriage had reached the point of disintegration and Hendrika asked for a divorce. From then on Ans lived mainly with her mother. ‘I have vivid memories of my mother’s parents pleading with her not to go ahead with this divorce,’ Ans recalled, explaining that they were strong believers in the sanctity of marriage, but eventually



Ans in her Leiden neighbourhood (above) and with her parents, Pieter and Hendrika, in the late 1930s.

they came around to the idea — so long as Hendrika found Pieter a new wife. She travelled to Amsterdam to meet a marriage broker, who had on his books a widowed Jewish woman named Jetta, who had a young son and who had managed to escape capture by the Germans. Pieter married Jetta ‘in a quick rush’, thereby satisfying his in-laws’ demand.

It was then Hendrika’s turn to find a replacement spouse. Around 1948, while Ans was away at a Girl Guides camp, her mother suddenly remarried. She was told the news when she arrived back home. ‘They perhaps thought it was easier to do this while I was not around,’ Ans reasoned.¹²

Her mother’s new husband, Abel, was ‘damaged . . . The war may have caused his damage, but he was possibly like that already. He had been to prison after the war for collaborating with the Germans.’¹³

‘Straight after, when the war finished,’ she explained with almost anthropological interest, ‘there were so many damaged people, and I became curious about them . . . The young blond German soldier sitting in the back of the tram talking to my mother was saying how he missed his family, and those sorts of things stay with you. They were also people, and they came from families.’ She was prepared to overlook external differences in order to try to understand the essence of the human condition.

Schooling had been intermittent during the war, and when schools reopened it was only for limited hours. Ans felt psychologically imprisoned for the duration. ‘The shops closed, the schools closed, I had no playmates whatsoever. There just were no other children left in the centre of town. All the other children had gone with their families to where they could find food easier.’¹⁴

When the family moved briefly from Leiden to Haarlem in 1947 there was a reprieve:

When we had moved into Haarlem, I had been way ahead in my schooling and there were no girls in my area. I joined a team of boys and behind the house were railway yards and we would go on these trundlers behind the trains. We would go into the bunkers

and make little fires and find bullets and throw them in. We did all sorts of naughty wee things.¹⁵

There were also trips to the windswept dunes at Zandvoort, where Ans could enjoy carefree moments with her friends, running around the sand dunes and gazing across the seemingly endless expanse of the North Sea.

With her return to Leiden and the collapse of her parents' marriage, that brief interlude of normality had come to an end. 'I grew up pretty isolated. I would come home from school and just go and amuse myself — make things by myself.' Whenever there was an opportunity for some sort of social engagement she rushed at it. 'After the war, when a few more children had come back, I packed them all up and took them to buy lollies. I was their leader!'¹⁶

ANS' FORMAL EDUCATION HAD begun the same year the Germans invaded. Hendrika had enrolled her in a Montessori school because she felt Ans needed to be around other children of the same age, but she changed her mind about the school after a week and enrolled her instead in a pre-school where, among other creative activities, she got to try clay modelling. 'I was given a lump of clay and I made a face. Just observing features. And that went around the whole school as "Look, she's actually looked," so from then on I thought, *Okay, I can do that*. I was four.'¹⁷

Her father was still part of her life and continued to exercise some influence over her. 'I have a sense for design', Ans said, 'because after the war he [Pieter] had these little buildings in another town and he made that into a big shop.' Her father's jewellery and leather goods were not at the luxury end of the market but they did incorporate good design, and this paternal artistry clearly insinuated itself into the young Ans.

But any semblance of a positive relationship with her father was undermined by her stepfather, who was determined to inflict harm on Pieter. Just as Pieter was on the cusp of expanding his business, Abel informed the

tax department about alleged irregularities in Pieter's financial activities. Fearing imprisonment, Ans' father took his remaining stock and fled to Indonesia with his new wife, Jetta (who had been born there), and their four-month-old baby, Arvid Westra, Ans' half-brother.

Abel had successfully driven Pieter from Ans' life. '[Abel] was a strange mixture of a person,' she told me. More than that, he was a paedophile.

When he married my mother it was during the polio epidemic and he got a job as a swimming instructor for polio patients. The job only lasted two weeks because they found that he couldn't be trusted with the small children. Now my mother actually stopped him. She had that over him. 'If you touch my daughter one more time . . .' because he had had a go . . . These things are terrible, and you can cry your eyes out over having gone through it, but it wasn't like that at all. It was all an adventure. I don't know why.¹⁸

Whether her stepfather's actions actually left barely any lasting effect, or whether Ans' impassive recounting of these events was a way of compartmentalising the trauma, we cannot know. Abel's volatile relationship with Hendrika, along with his various predilections, were aspects of his behaviour that Ans, at least partially, came to regard as being part of the rough and tumble of childhood. She later concluded that Abel was bipolar:

He would be quite loving [to Hendrika] and then the next thing he would be chasing her and making her do all the work. Mother was sort of beginning to lean on me — [asking] why? Why this, why that? . . . Anyway, Abel at one point he had a fall . . . he was lying there stretched out, and Mother handed me the fry-pan to clobber him. She hated him; felt trapped.¹⁹

DURING HER TEENAGE YEARS some of Ans' earlier loneliness receded in the face of her curiosity about people.

It's because of the way I grew up. There were very few people who were different, so there was in me a curiosity to understand people — where they came from, what was happening for them, why were people different and why did they have different values? And I wanted to know and to learn from it — and people are still teaching me about what is important to them.²⁰

So when her mother offered her a reward for completing her third-form (year 9) studies, she asked for a camera, and went on to test the small Agfa bellows foldable camera by taking photographs of her aunts' houses, and of rooflines in Leiden, searching out interesting patterns to capture on film. One image in particular gave her a sense of accomplishment. It was of a sunset, and she was so pleased with it that she took it to the local camera shop to have it enlarged and gave it to her maternal grandparents as a gift.

2. The Family of Man

The end of her secondary schooling at the end of 1952 was for Ans Westra not some fearful plunge into adulthood, but rather more of a gentle glide from one stage of life to the next. Her early schooling had been intermittent (courtesy of the war), and in her teenage years it was consistent but not especially inspiring. At the age of 16 she left school and a year later moved to Rotterdam, where she boarded while attending the art school *Industrieschool voor Meisjes*. Her arrival in the port city in January 1953 coincided with the great North Sea flood, in which over 1800 people were killed by surging seawater during a particularly brutal winter storm.¹

It was out of this disastrous deluge that the opportunity had emerged for Ans to continue her studies. Struggling farmers throughout the country suddenly required extra labour to assist with the clean-up, and money was now in short supply for many families. As a result there were an unanticipated number of vacancies at the *Industrieschool voor Meisjes* as prospective students opted to work instead, which meant Ans easily secured a place. Among the subjects taught over the four-year programme were embroidery and other textile arts, drawing and fine art.² The quality of instruction was uneven, Ans later noted: “The teachers . . . were highly unsuitable . . . there was one really good one but the drawing teacher and the embroidery teacher had other priorities.”³

Part of the curriculum involved students travelling to different parts

of Europe, surveying small samples of the continent's built heritage. Ans enjoyed art history, and she loved travelling, so she wondered about a career that combined the two.

During her time in Rotterdam, Abel took her to the *Family of Man* exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.⁴ The exhibition of 503 photographs focusing on people's everyday lives in 68 countries had a pronounced theme of the universalism of human experience and a profound effect on her.

The curator of the exhibition (and author of the accompanying book), Edward Steichen, described his approach to selecting the particular images that were selected for display:

We are seeking photographs covering the gamut of human relations, particularly the hard-to-find photographs of the everydayness in the relationships of man to himself, to his family, to the community, and to the world we live in. Our field is from babies to philosophers, from the kindergarten to the university, from the child's home-made toys to scientific research, from tribal councils of primitive peoples to the councils of the United Nations. We are interested in lovers and marriage and child-bearing, in the family unit with its joys, trials, and tribulations, its deep-rooted devotions and its antagonisms . . . We are concerned with the individual family unit as it exists all over the world and its reactions to the beginnings of life and following through to death and burial.⁵

The Family of Man's photographs, which were ultimately seen by 9 million people globally, awakened Ans' mind to some of the possibilities of the relatively new genre of photography. As she emerged from the exhibition, her imagination was almost transfigured: 'I always wanted to travel, and I wanted to have a way of expressing myself', and photography seemed the perfect medium. 'I felt overpowered by it . . . It was so much you were



Ans in her teens
in the Netherlands,
late 1940s.



staggered by it . . . It was marvellous to see what you could do recording life. Just everyday happenings. The whole cycle of life.⁶

Ans did not want to emulate the images in the exhibition. 'I thought, oh no, that's the wrong approach. I can put my mark on my work.' Not long before, working hard to save money from working during her holidays, she had managed to buy herself a twin-lens reflex Rolleiflex camera.⁷

The other moment of photographic revelation came when she discovered the book *Wij Zijn 17 (We Are 17)*, by the Dutch photographer Johan van der Keuken. Published in 1955, this book consisted of photographs of postwar Dutch youth taken when van der Keuken himself was aged 17.⁸ Most of the scenes in this remarkable book were staged, but van der Keuken's arrangements, and the various moods he succeeded in conveying in these often highly sophisticated images, left a deep impression. 'They were very sort of solemn portraits.' She scrutinised their composition and concluded that she could experiment to achieve similar types of image.⁹

Inspired by the fact that van der Keuken was two years younger than her and yet had already achieved some prominence in documentary photography, Ans began taking images of her friends, endeavouring to emulate van der Keuken's technique while at the same time working out what it was that made certain compositions worthy of being photographed in her own mind. She discovered she had a 'feel' for photography: 'I tried to carry on with drawing . . . but photography was really what I could say the most with, so I pursued it.'¹⁰

IN 1950 ANS' PERSONAL life was suddenly ruffled by the news that her father, Pieter, was leaving Indonesia. The political situation in that country was rapidly deteriorating, and he had discovered that Jetta was having an affair. (Although, as Ans later observed: 'That's his story; what happened we don't know.') Rather than returning home to the Netherlands, Pieter had decided to move to New Zealand.

In the early 1950s the New Zealand government embarked on a campaign to encourage Dutch immigration, chiefly to address labour shortages.¹¹ The Netherlands was still grappling with the aftermath of war and, more recently, the devastating flooding; Pieter sensed that New Zealand might offer him more opportunities. Ans and her father had maintained a steady correspondence and he wrote to tell her that when she turned 21, and had finished her exams, he would pay for her to have a six-month holiday in his new home country.

Ans did not hesitate, seeing an opportunity not only for travel but also for further honing her photographic skills. She hastily arranged travel documents and booked a passage on the Royal Rotterdam Lloyd shipping line's *Sibajak*, which berthed in Wellington in December 1957.¹²

'I came to New Zealand with a good camera,' she recalled. 'I had brought some colour film because I was going on the immigrants' ship — things like crossing the equator, [sailing] through the Panama Canal. They're very colourful.' Not all of these images have survived, but those that have point to Ans' deepening enthusiasm for this artform, and her interest in the people around her as much as the dramatic scenery or unusual locations.

The contrasts in scale between her old home and her new one took a while to sink in. New Zealand's land area of 268,000 square kilometres was six and a half times that of the Netherlands, but at 2 million people, its population was a fraction of the Netherlands' 11 million.

Pieter Westra travelled to Wellington by train to meet his daughter, and almost immediately they headed back to Auckland, where Pieter was renting a house in the west Auckland suburb of Glen Eden. On that 12-hour train journey he explained his side of the marriage break-up with her mother to her. The memory stuck with her: 'He had this — this is a very Dutch thing — you don't just say something once, you say it at least three times and it might sink in.' She described the 'discussion' as analogous to 'being brainwashed'.¹³

There was a spare bedroom in the Glen Eden house but Pieter Westra made it clear that she would need to get a job and pay rent. Pieter was by now married for a third time. He and his wife, Jackie, had two small children,



Ans in Wellington
in the late 1950s.

Robert and Yvonne, and hoped that Ans would do much of the housework. It was not a happy home situation, principally because of her father's relentless efforts to justify his role in their shared past. His defensive monologues dominated her first weeks in the country: 'He was forever saying that he'd left the business in Leiden to pay for my education, and my mother's claim that she had saved the money [was rubbish]. There was all of that. At one point my father said to me that he'd only got me to New Zealand to take away the last thing that he could hurt my mother with.'¹⁴

Her patience snapped. She packed her suitcase and announced that she was leaving. His response was 'Oh no, don't go. Jackie will never forgive me.'¹⁵

Ans traipsed around Auckland in an unsuccessful search for any sort of photography-related work. Eventually, desperate for money, she took a job on the production line at Crown Lynn, one of the largest ceramics factories in the Southern Hemisphere.¹⁶ She learned to manufacture plates and cups, and line them with gold etching. '[W]ith a fine brush you would put that against the spinning cup and you had a line . . . and then I learnt how to put patterns on. They go over the glaze and then it gets fired again and sinks under the glaze.' It was hardly an emporium of creativity, but Ans was gradually accumulating 'little skills'.¹⁷ The pay was modest, the work generally tedious, but in the process she got to meet two of the country's foremost studio potters: Doreen Blumhardt and Helen Mason.¹⁸ As inspirational as these artists were, Ans eventually decided her future did not lie in ceramics.

It was now six months since her arrival, and she was becoming disillusioned with New Zealand — or at least with her current situation. Auckland did offer one consolation: its coast. Some weekends she would visit the city's wild west coast beaches and explore the marine debris that washed up on the shore. 'I was intrigued with all the bits of driftwood I would find, and shells — shells from the Pacific.' She took some shells home and her half-sister Yvonne, who was 20 years younger, 'managed to get into my room one time and [found] these tiny little shells . . . She picked them up and she wanted to keep them but she didn't know where to put [them], so she put [them] up her nose.'¹⁹

The beaches notwithstanding, by the autumn of 1958 Ans was starting to feel that her life had detoured into a cul-de-sac. Her job was unsatisfying, and although she had returned to her father's house, her home life was increasingly unbearable, and the volcanic force of creativity that was building inside her still had no outlet. New Zealand felt like a socially stifling 'dated back-water where nothing ever happened. There was none of the life we had in Europe.'²⁰ She decided to return to the Netherlands. Her father was firmly opposed, mainly, according to Ans, because he was afraid that Ans' mother would discover that, despite his boasts, Pieter had not made a success of his life.

Ans had little contact with the Dutch expatriate community while she was in Auckland, one notable exception being the friendship she established with Kees (Cornelis) Hos, who had emigrated from the Netherlands with his wife, Tine, the previous year. Hos had taught at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, and in 1957 he had opened the New Vision Gallery in Takapuna, on Auckland's North Shore. (It later moved to His Majesty's Arcade, just off Auckland's Queen Street, where it would show a mix of painters and craft artists that included Philip Clairmont, Gordon Walters, Theo Schoon, Len Castle, Barry Cleavin, Don Driver, Ted Dutch, Milan Mrkusich, John Parker and Philip Trusstum.)²¹

ANS'S SHORT STINT WORKING at the Bauhaus-influenced New Vision,²² must have encouraged her to believe it was possible to establish some sort of artistic career in New Zealand. But as the months in Glen Eden wore on while she saved for her fare back to Leiden, it dawned on her that the same lack of opportunities had been the very reason she had left the Netherlands in the first place, and she had invested a lot in her early months in New Zealand. She reappraised her situation. She had, she decided, to improve her English, try to find work, and come to terms with a very different cultural terrain.

A big Māori family lived next door, and often when her father came home from work one of the children would cheerily yell: 'Hi Peter, how are you?' Ans' father detested this degree of familiarity, and Ans was intrigued by the interaction. 'I was just seeing the contrast between the stiff upper lip — basically, when visitors came, the kids had to put little gloves on to perform on the piano. That was my father's place, and then over the fence [was] this happy, bouncy family. I thought, "That's how I would like my family to be."²³

Reluctant to give up on New Zealand just yet, in 1958, as a last-ditch measure, Westra moved to Wellington, where she hoped there would be more work in photography and she would be free from her father's daily presence.

Part of the attraction of the country had been its sparse population — ‘Society was so small-scale . . . [it] was easier for me because you got to know a lot of people’²⁴ — which enabled a form of social intimacy that had been lacking back home. But above all, it was far enough away geographically from the Netherlands that she finally felt able to start expanding the boundaries of her identity. New Zealand was becoming a place of refuge from unresolved aspects of her past. Ans Westra began a process of exploration, discovery and escape.

Years later, she observed at a school reunion that most of the others in her class had gone on to become teachers, had got married, and had settled down to lives of what she regarded as mundane domesticity. Her own trajectory had been so different, and, looking back at her former classmates, she described their choices as indicative of their ‘insecurity’. Their lives were a distinct counterpoint to the burgeoning rebelliousness that accompanied Ans’ early years in New Zealand. By her own admission, among her former friends from Rotterdam she ‘wasn’t very popular’, chiefly, she surmised, because she possessed ‘that sort of desire to be freethinking’.²⁵

Ans soon became swept up in the new possibilities Wellington offered. ‘I found my way and my place here,’ she declared of her new home.²⁶ Outwardly, at least, she had successfully amputated herself from her past, and was facing a future that, while uncertain, at the very least seemed to offer her the opportunity of fresh experiences.

3. Te Ao Hou: The New World

The biographical trail of Ans Westra's early years in New Zealand is sparse. Her own account betrays a tendency to avert her gaze from difficult personal events such as the death of her mother. The more fraught the recollection, the more skeletal its retelling.

What is certain is that when she travelled by bus to Wellington in 1958, her intentions were to see more of the country, and find whatever employment she could in order to save for a ticket back to the Netherlands. She did not plan to make Wellington her permanent home.¹ Part of the reason was that the type of photography she wanted to pursue was not the sort from which she believed she could make a living in New Zealand.

Full-time photography work involved photographing school classes, sports teams, weddings and studio portraits, which would be an excruciating existence. Ans craved the limitless possibilities of capturing the vibrancy and noise of the world. But how could she make a living at that?

She toyed with the idea of museum work and concluded that photographing artefacts could end up being just as stultifying as portrait work. Then in 1960 came a breakthrough with her first sale of work to the quarterly journal *Te Ao Hou: The New World*, published by the Department of Maori Affairs. The magazine had been established in 1952, and was significant for having content in te reo Māori as well as in English, and for promoting work by Māori authors.² In their first editorial, *Te Ao Hou's* editors described the journal as 'a magazine for the Maori people', and expressed

the hope that 'Pakehas will . . . find much in it that may interest them and broaden their knowledge of the Maori'. The publication was 'planned mainly to provide interesting and informative reading for Maori homes. *Te Ao Hou* should become like a "marae" on paper, where all questions of interest to the Maori can be discussed . . .'

The journal's founders hoped 'to be able to rely on contributions, especially from Maoris, [of] articles, poems, drawings, photos, or anything else of interest . . . When contributions are accepted, they will be paid for.'³

The photographs Ans had sent them were the product of a hitchhiking trip around parts of the North Island, taking photographs along the way. 'I just travelled around. I was trying to see more of the country. Eventually I thought I would be better off having a car, so I stayed in paid employment until I could afford a car. I wanted to have more freedom. I slept in the car.'⁴

Te Ao Hou bought more photos but not enough to provide Ans with a living. 'They didn't really employ me, they just paid me for the work they published, which more or less covered expenses . . . It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. *Te Ao Hou* couldn't afford anyone to go on the road and be fully paid. They were working on a very small budget.'⁵ But if the pay was meagre, it was more than compensated for by the freedom to travel and explore facets of the country's indigenous culture, all the time honing her photographic technique and approach.

She took on a string of jobs, counting 13 at one point. 'It was all so easy, you could walk from one to another.'⁶ It may have been 'easy', but it was hardly a secure living. Yet Ans saw only opportunity.

The purpose of *Te Ao Hou* was to promote Māori creativity, especially in writing. However, when it came to photography, the editors initially were more concerned with Māori being the *subject* of the images than the creators of them. The door being left slightly ajar in this way allowed Ans to step into a world with which she had no familiarity.

She had initiated the contact herself when she approached the journal's editor, Erik Schwimmer, in 1960. In her words, she 'took some pretty pictures of Māori kids to him, and he bought them for covers, and that was the