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CAMERA ANTIPODE ANS WESTRA: Photography as a Form of Ethnographic & Historical Writing

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment
of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Social
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ABSTRACT

Camera Antipode: Ans Westra: Photography as a Form of Historical and Ethnographic Writing is a study of the career of the New Zealand social documentary photographer Ans Westra. It covers the period from her arrival in New Zealand from the Netherlands in 1957 right up until her most recent projects. The emphasis throughout is on Westra as a cross-cultural photographer whose work is best understood within various historical contexts and as a form of ethnographic and historical representation in its own right. The dissertation has two parts.

Part One, Isagogics, consists of three chapters that deal with a range of general issues that have shaped Westra's work and contribute to an understanding of its character. All three serve to *situate* Westra within multifarious conceptual frameworks and institutional contexts and establish the historical, cultural and intellectual field from which her creative project has emerged.

The seven chapters of Part Two, Exegesis, provide detailed readings of Westra's photographic books, taking in both her large-scale projects aimed at a general readership and her Bulletins and photographic essays for use in schools. Part Two proceeds chronologically and is divided into the decades of the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s and on up to the present.

A set of appendices follows Part Two. The first is a transcript of an interview with Ans Westra, the second a biographical chronology of her life and career, the third a list of her one-person and group exhibitions, and the fourth a set of photographs that are discussed in the text. Following the consolidated notes and references section is a bibliography in two parts: the first part is a complete list of Westra's published works, which constitutes the primary sources of the dissertation, followed by a fraction of the secondary sources – books, articles, and reviews of Westra's publications and exhibitions; the second part of the bibliography contains all non-Westra references cited.

PREFACE / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in the work of Ans Westra goes back a long way, but it began to take a more serious and focused turn in the mid-1980s when I first conceived the idea of doing post-graduate study from an anthropological perspective on her career. In 1985, I presented two papers, one for the New Zealand Association of Social Anthropologists' annual conference, the other for the New Zealand Cultural Studies Working Group's annual conference. The first, "Toward an Understanding of Anthropological Photographs", was on a general topic but it made reference to several of Westra's works. The second, "Reading Photographs: Approaching Ans Westra's *Washday at the Pa*", was focused on the Bulletin for Schools, *Washday at the pa*. Over the next three years, I continued to research aspects of Westra's practice and conducted a lengthy interview with the photographer in 1987. In 1988, I contributed an essay on *Washday* ("Ragged House Photographs: Ans Westra's *Washday at the Pa*") to the "South Pacific" double issue of the Australian journal *Photofile*. Following this the idea of doing an in-depth study of Westra went into abeyance as I pursued other projects, including a Masters thesis on another topic. I returned in earnest to the topic in 2003 when I began work on the *Handboek* project, which was coordinated by Luit Bieringa of Blair Wakefield Exhibitions. I acted as exhibition researcher and editor of the book (*Handboek: Ans Westra Photographs*, 2004) that accompanied the large-scale retrospective exhibition, which toured throughout New Zealand and also went to Holland. I contributed two essays to the book (" 'P' is for pathways into Ans Westra's photographic practice: 'A' is for ANSWers to questions about the identity of our object of study"; and "From the Family of Man to the family of 'Ans': Ans Westra's photographic books for children") and prepared the documentation sections (chronology, bibliography, and list of exhibitions). Shortly after beginning work on this project, I enrolled in the doctoral programme in Social Anthropology of the School of People, Environment and Planning at Massey University, Palmerston North in order to realise my long-standing desire to write a dissertation on Ans Westra's complete career. The result is *Camera Antipode - Ans Westra: Photography as a Form of Ethnographic and Historical Writing*.

I wish to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Jeffrey Sluka for his prompt and careful reading of drafts of the dissertation and his detailed comments on all of its components. He did a wonderful job and kept me on track in maintaining the unity and coherence of such a large undertaking.

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Luit Bieringa, coordinator of the *Handboek* project and all the contributors to the publication *Handboek: Ans Westra photographs*, especially John B. Turner who made various materials available to the project and has always shown an interest in my work on Ans Westra.

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Special thanks to my family: my wife, Virginia Callanan for supporting me throughout the protracted period of research and writing, especially during the final 12 months; and my sons Robin and Beck McDonald who have had to put up with piles of research material scattered around our communal living areas. And last but not least, my mother Joan McDonald and my father, the late Malcolm McDonald, without whose unstinting support and encouragement I would never have set out on the path that has lead to this dissertation.

And, finally, I must thank Ans Westra for producing the prodigious body of work that is the subject of *Camera Antipode*, and for answering all the queries I put to her.

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