



*Demonstration, Karangahape Road, Auckland, c1972*

## Chapter 1 Looking Closely

**I**N THE EARLY 1970S MARTI FRIEDLANDER TOOK A photograph amidst a women's movement demonstration in Karangahape Road, Auckland (opposite). We see fragments of the event. 'No woman is free until all women are free', declares a banner filling half the picture. The photograph's meanings are not as straightforward as the slogan. In the right foreground a young woman holding a suitcase faces frontwards. Bare-armed, wearing high-waisted trousers and a loose-necked jersey, she looks sombre and uncommunicative, her gaze fixed on the photographer. On the other side of the picture, we see the head of another woman, cut off at the shoulders. She looks down and away to the left, as if oblivious to what is happening all around her. In this image the legible words on the banner, which could easily come across as a hackneyed catch-cry, take on a fresh poignancy. These two young women, seemingly alone and silent in the crowd, are accidental embodiments of the slogan. The photograph raises questions: Are these two women free? What is freedom?

Marti Friedlander's photograph does not define either these women or the women's movement. The photograph is not just a record of an event. Rather, Friedlander's image offers an open conversation with its subject, one that produces ambiguous, multiple meanings. The photographer herself is engaged in that conversation. In this image one senses both her sympathies for feminism and her suspicion of totalising ideologies. Integral to Marti Friedlander's work of more than 50 years are the frequently ambivalent relationships between people in the photographic space, and between the subject and the photographer. Her images intimate feelings and thoughts, including her own, of which the

people in the photograph themselves might not have been aware.

This book focuses on photographs. Work and life, of course, are intimately entangled, but while Marti Friedlander's personality is inseparable from how and why she photographs, this is not a biography. Though she is now publicly well known, she remains very private. Consider an early self-portrait (following page). It is radically cropped. What we see is about a third of the negative. Taken before a mirror as she peered down into the viewfinder of her Rolleiflex camera, it may look spontaneous. Yet the photograph is clearly a studied construction. It brings to mind a well-known image type, the photographer mirrored in the act of taking her portrait, such as those of the German-Jewish exiles Ilse Bing and Lotte Jacobi.<sup>1</sup> The composition is tight and spare. Marti's right arm and the side of her face are lit. The left is in partial shadow. Her figure is right in the front plane, as if almost in our space. The interior behind (in fact a corridor in her husband Gerrard's dental practice) is both amorously closed-in and cues recession into depth, with a fugitive trace of a doorframe to the left. The taut arrangement suggests a strong sense of inwardness. How did she get there? There need to be beginnings.

MARTI FRIEDLANDER WAS BORN IN BARNESLEY HOUSES, near Bethnal Green in London's East End, in 1928, the daughter of Sophie and Philip Gordon, Russian-Jewish immigrants. At the age of three Marti was placed in the nearby Ben Jonson Home administered by the London County Council. In 1933 she shifted to the Norwood Orphan Aid Asylum, a Jewish institution for about 350



Self-portrait, Auckland, 1964

children in South East London, near Streatham Common. Marti lived there in a secure and supportive environment: 'We did not think of ourselves as disadvantaged.'<sup>2</sup> When war broke out in 1939, the orphanage was evacuated to Worthing, with the children billeted by local families. From 1942 to 1943 Marti studied photography on a trade scholarship at Bloomsbury Technical School, relocated in Letchworth Garden City for a couple of years. Then she had another year on a scholarship at the excellent Camberwell School of Art in South London. The social climate there was refreshingly bohemian, and the important modernist artists John Minton, Victor Pasmore, and Michael Ayrton were inspirational teachers: 'I soon discovered that painting was not my forte. I remember the principal . . . William Johnstone looking at a painting of a "still life" on my easel, and commenting on my singular lack of any idea of perspective. He was right.'<sup>3</sup>

Financial need ended her tertiary education. Serendipitously responding to an advertisement in the *British Journal of Photography* in 1946, Marti Friedlander got a job that turned out invaluable – as an assistant first to Douglas Glass and then to Gordon Crocker, both leading photographers, in their shared Kensington studio. Glass (1901–1978) had been a United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration photographer documenting life in displaced persons' camps in Germany after the war. He became a prominent portraitist of artists, writers, actors, musicians, and politicians for the *Sunday Times*. A 1953 self-portrait presents a robust, pugnacious, bearded figure, clad in a checked shirt, a waistcoat and a bow tie. A twinkle in his eye, he poses against a wall of images. 'Although born in New Zealand, Douglas Glass', he wrote, 'likes to fancy himself a European with a strong colonial background, and his early escapades and origins are conveniently buried in the obscurity of the bush.'<sup>4</sup> Glass professed to hate New Zealand and never returned. Crocker (c 1908–1981) could hardly have been more different. He was a modest, gentle and deeply religious man, who worked primarily as a fashion photographer. His personal kindness meant a lot to Marti, and his portraits of her and her sister, Anne, are images of quiet warmth, as if taken by a devoted father.<sup>5</sup>

Working for Glass and Crocker, Marti Friedlander honed her technical skills in printing and retouching and vastly expanded her knowledge of photographic practices and processes. Glass famously observed that she could produce an image from a blank negative. In 1951 she



Martha and Anne Gordon, c1954. PHOTOGRAPH BY GORDON CROCKER

visited Germany where she did menial work at a camp in Nuremberg for displaced German youth. During the early 1950s she made trips to Israel and Paris.

Marti continued at the studio until 1957 and her marriage to Gerrard Friedlander. He, fatefully, was from New Zealand, and a dentist (even if mistaken for a farmer by some of Marti's London friends). Gerrard, though, had been born Gerhard in Berlin in 1930. With his family he had emigrated in 1935, first to the British Mandate of Palestine and then in 1937 to New Zealand, not an easy place for Jewish refugees from Nazism to gain entry to. In April 1957 the couple set off on a honeymoon journey by Lambretta motor scooter through Europe and then spent a couple of months in Israel before moving to New Zealand. 'Looking forward to arriving with a sense of adventure. I had few ideas of what to expect,' she later wrote in her journal.<sup>6</sup>

Disembarking in Wellington on an early morning in February 1958, the couple drove with Gerrard's father and brother through the centre of the North Island to Auckland. Marti remembers: 'We stopped for a meal en

route; fried fish and chips and mashed potatoes, bread and butter and a cup of tea, which even hunger could not quite digest.<sup>7</sup> Home for the next nine years, except for an extended break in England and Israel in 1962–63, was Henderson, a mix of rural holdings and new suburbs on the western edges of the expanding city. For a London girl this could well have been a subtropical Siberia. ‘The first three years were the hardest thing I’ve ever experienced. I had to toughen myself to survive,’<sup>8</sup> she recently remarked. Marti found official attitudes and behaviour puritanical: ‘I think I fell off the edge of the world when I came to New Zealand. Being in a society that was so authoritarian was like going back to an institution, and I had escaped the institution.’<sup>9</sup> She felt isolated, often unhappy, and out of place: ‘In London I had made my own sort of life, living in a bedsit, able to make my own decisions. I felt I had returned to the classroom. You had to put up your hand to do anything.’<sup>10</sup>

BACK IN 1958, MARTI FRIEDLANDER HAD NO THOUGHTS of a career as a photographer. She worked as a nurse for Gerrard for three years, returning seriously to photography because she needed something of her own: ‘The only way I could cope with being here was to express what I felt about the place by taking photographs,’ she said in 1997.<sup>11</sup> Picture-making became the means by which she made sense of the new country and society around her. She was driven, and still is. ‘I take pictures because I have to,’ she later remarked.<sup>12</sup> It was also a shield: ‘People used to say you’re hiding behind the viewfinder, and I’d say that’s right, I am.’<sup>13</sup>

Her first published photographs in New Zealand were two of modernist sculptures by Jim Allen and John Kingston in the September 1959 issue of *Landfall*. But it was only after the stillbirth of her baby in 1963 while overseas that Marti Friedlander decided to return to New Zealand with the aim of becoming a freelance professional photographer. She quickly made her mark with her work from 1965 for the quarterly *Wine Review*,<sup>14</sup> and over the next two decades established herself as a pre-eminent photographer in this country. The diverse publications in which her photographs have appeared attest to her broad range in subject, theme, and genre. In the 1960s and 1970s her work featured in periodicals such as the *New Zealand Herald*, the *Auckland Star*, the *Auckland Weekly News*, the *New Zealand Listener*, the

*Town Planning Quarterly*, *Playdate*, various medical periodicals, and the women’s magazine *Thursday* (‘for Younger Women’). The feminist magazine *Broadsheet*, the arts periodicals *Landfall*, *Ascent*, *Islands*, *New Argot* and *Art New Zealand*, the Maori affairs periodical *Mana*, and *Hearing News* also published her photographs.<sup>15</sup> Marti Friedlander’s ground-breaking books include *Moko: Maori Tattooing in the 20th Century* (1972, and reprinted several times through to 2008, with text by Michael King), *Larks in a Paradise: New Zealand Portraits* (1974, text by James McNeish), *Contemporary New Zealand Painters, Volume One A – M* (1980, text by Jim and Mary Barr), *Marti Friedlander Photographs*, the catalogue accompanying the 2001 Auckland Art Gallery exhibition curated by Ron Brownson, and, with Dick Scott, *Pioneers of New Zealand Wine* (2002).

Marti Friedlander’s photographs feature, too, in a host of other books, their subjects and concerns equally wide-ranging – old age, sociology, New Zealand history, language use, female high achievers, tourism, Fiji and the Tokelau Islands, biographies, monographs on artists and exhibition catalogues, for instance – and on the dust jackets of novels and volumes of poetry. The 2001 show, which focused mainly on her photographs from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s – decades of far-reaching social, cultural, and political shifts in New Zealand – travelled the country from 2001 to 2004. It made Marti Friedlander, not entirely willingly, into a prominent public figure, interviewed, photographed and filmed, most notably in Shirley Horrocks’s *Marti: The Passionate Eye* (2004). This documentary went on to success and awards in film festivals in Germany, Italy, Israel, the United States, Canada, and Australia.<sup>16</sup> Since the exhibition, Marti’s earlier photographs have taken on second lives, while there is also a growing demand in New Zealand and overseas for her work since the 1990s.

Marti Friedlander’s photographs have been used for documentary purposes and many provide valuable records of individuals and groups that have made substantial impacts on New Zealand society over the last 50 years.<sup>17</sup> However, she does not take a detached, ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach to photography. Rather, many of her photographs picture interactive moments and events in which Marti herself participates. To convey relationships effectively, the immediate visuality of the photographs must compel. The architecture of the image is crucial: how light and dark areas are orchestrated within the



Marseille, 1973

space of the photograph, how figures and objects are placed, how angle and the distance of the photographer from her subjects are deployed. Take her photograph of the small, barefoot North African girl peeping from the doorway of a dark room into the light of a Marseille street (previous page). The forceful diagonal accents of the stone doorstep, the rough blocks of the building and paving counterpoint the predominant rectangularity of the doorway. Appearing to hover in the doorway, her arms thrust out as if holding on, the girl glances into the alley where a shadow cast by a building across the way cuts into the narrow space. This is a threshold between social spaces too. One of the girl's feet is lit, the other is in shadow. The minimal, tense composition is fundamental to the making of this 'decisive moment' – a term first used for Cartier-Bresson's images resulting from the coming together of the photographer's alert eye and a finely tuned sense of pictorial composition.<sup>18</sup>

Marti Friedlander's most familiar photographs, the 150 in the 2001–04 travelling exhibition, are large prints made specifically for the occasion by photographers Haru Sameshima and Mark Adams. On the direction of the curator, Sameshima and Adams printed the whole negatives or cropped them only slightly. Marti Friedlander approaches printing quite differently. She frequently crops the negative extensively. She does not believe that the integrity of the negative is paramount. 'For me the image was part photo, part creating the final image in the enlarger, with all the different interpretations of the original seeing . . . the image could be intensified as I wished . . . Every neg has hidden meanings. I just loved being able to make several images from one neg,' she wrote in 2007.<sup>19</sup> Because of that cropping, the photographs reproduced in this book that also appeared in the 2001–04 exhibition are effectively different images. The subjects are nearer both to the picture plane and viewers in her prints. The exhibition photographs are more distanced and documentary in look, with the viewer at a safe remove from the subject.

PHOTOGRAPHY, PORTABLE AND NOT BOUND BY LANGUAGE, is the ideal medium for travellers and migrants.<sup>20</sup> Marti Friedlander is extraordinarily mobile. She has produced major bodies of work in England, Israel, France, and several other European countries, Japan, India and China,

and Fiji, Tonga and Tokelau, besides New Zealand. Only a few of these images have been published or exhibited. Marti's travels deeply shape how and why she photographs. Her sustaining sensibility is characterised by restlessness, a keen and empathetic interest in how people go about their lives, and strong emotional identifications with those who are on the edges of societies. And travel to a new land, or into a new socio-cultural space, can puncture the habitual and allow new angles of vision.<sup>21</sup>

Leading photography critics such as A.D. Coleman and Max Kozloff have asked why there have been so many innovative and influential photographers of Jewish descent.<sup>22</sup> Frequently, Jewish peoples are simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the societies in which they live. Certainly, Marti Friedlander has been at once in the thick of it and watching from the margins. Acutely developed observational, analytical, and interpretive skills are keys to Jewish survival. Marti's sharp eye, her ability to visualise conflictual states in the one face or situation, and the edge that the otherwise ordinary has in her photographs might owe more than a little to her Jewishness. But ultimately it is her individual eye that is crucial to her photographs. And that individuality comes out of a complex of intersecting factors – from the personal and familial, to the more broadly social, occupational, cultural and ethnic, to sheer chance.<sup>23</sup>

The New Zealand in which Marti Friedlander arrived in 1958 was still culturally 'provincial'. Most of its nationals then were 'small town' in their responses to 'aliens'.<sup>24</sup> In the 1960s the country was only just at the beginnings of any citification and modernity in ways of living and seeing. For quite some time Marti Friedlander was a stranger here. She felt estranged and was frequently treated, at times resented, as 'different' – her manner too open, ebullient, and demonstrative.<sup>25</sup> She brought an outsider's eye to her picturing of people and life in New Zealand. 'I have always lived and worked in a very independent way . . . often to the point of irritating others. I learned at a very early age not to follow the crowd, preferring to depend on my own awareness of the world around me and to stand by my own decisions,' she wrote.<sup>26</sup> It can be an advantage to be an outsider. It allows a person to see a new place in ways which the native-born can not. A creative foreigner brings a more penetrating vision, which does not originate in the place itself.<sup>27</sup> As Marti Friedlander discovered, she needed to engage with



FAR LEFT Marti Friedlander's print, *Pat and Gil Hanly*, 1969. LEFT Auckland Art Gallery print from the same negative, 2000. OVERLEAF *Eglinton Valley*, 1970

that new world and try to understand. And, of course, her work is now celebrated in New Zealand: she has come inside, but at the same time she has not settled.

ONE OF MARTI FRIEDLANDER'S BEST-KNOWN PHOTOGRAPHS is *Eglinton Valley* (overleaf). First published in *Larks in a Paradise* (1974), it was the flagship image for her Auckland Art Gallery exhibition in 2001 and appeared on T-shirts, buses, and posters with the caption: 'What are you looking at?' The photograph pictures an encounter with a flock of sheep on a misty rural road. The sheep, spread across the image, look back at us. At first glance the photograph might seem to reference the banal idea of New Zealand as a land of sheep. Here, though, the clichéd is subverted and transformed. Those sheep, sentient and wary, block the way through, as though querying our presence there. It is as if the photographer and the viewer are intruders. The ordinary becomes entrancing.

*Eglinton Valley* is about 'really seeing'. It quietly complicates the everyday, suggesting other possibilities of perception and meaning. 'Really seeing' is the writer W.G. Sebald's phrase to describe 'certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking'.<sup>28</sup> Add the best photographers. *Eglinton Valley* is also about

stillness. It fixes a moment, an instant where movement stills, as if we are experiencing a primal event. The power of the still image lies in the very stillness. It endures in time as well as space.

While Marti Friedlander's photographs have often been exhibited, most of them were made to be held in the hand, whether as prints or in books and magazines. This permits an intimacy between photograph and viewer that is not possible in a public exhibition space. It is hoped that this book offers a similar closeness. The photographs have been chosen for their intrinsic qualities as images made by a photographer closely engaged with her subjects. I have focused on detailed explorations of Marti Friedlander's main subjects and how she pictures them. Her photographs invite the viewer's prolonged engagement and interpretation.

The world is flooded with disposable photographs – machine-made images that can lead to imaginative and conceptual blindness. In contrast, Marti Friedlander's photographs assert the individual eye and mind. They constantly oppose the formulaic and stereotypical. And they affirm the continuing and enduring value of the still photograph as a site of thought and feeling. Her photographs testify to the values of sustained, inquiring, and attentive looking, both by the photographer and by the viewer.

