

Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess

11 October 2023 – 21 January 2024

Gallery 4

Media View: 10 October

I want to
be thinking and speaking in another language. I turn into a machine in this language. This language is a machine language now. Do other languages turn into machine sounds and lie flat, heavy, immobile on the page? I might lie flat, heavy and immobile on the bed. My page changes into a sheet of sky, or more complicatedly a form of the external environment, language travels along the construction.

Anna Mendelssohn, poem beginning “to have some stupid bloke”,
constant red/mingled damask, no 1. (1986)

Whitechapel Gallery presents the first institutional display of works by the poet, writer, and artist **Anna Mendelssohn** (b.1948, UK - d.2009, UK), who was also known as **Grace Lake**.

Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess brings together a selection of 35 works from the Anna Mendelssohn Archive at the University of Sussex Special Collections, home to the main repository of Mendelssohn’s oeuvre, from juvenilia to the poems written in her last days in 2009. Across poetry, notebook entries, and works on paper, the exhibition contends with Mendelssohn’s experimentations with language as a medium capable of giving form to history and social experience. Language is used as a restless, poetic and oftentimes sardonic device in the artist’s pastels, drawings and manifestos, while it is rendered anew as pictorial forms in her ideogrammatic works. Through the confluence of poetry and visual art, the works on view offer insight into Mendelssohn’s examination of language: how it is created, destroyed, and opened up by iniquities in public and private life, such as those of war, loss, fascism, and incarceration.

In 1972, Mendelssohn stood trial for her alleged involvement in a series of bombings connected to the extreme leftists, The Angry Brigade. Though she pleaded innocent in what was then the longest criminal trial in British history (a position she defended throughout her life), Mendelssohn was convicted and sentenced to ten years at Holloway Prison. However, for teaching her fellow inmates literacy and drama, she was released on parole after five. On display is the sketch *Untitled (Presumed Self-Portrait)* (c.

Press Release

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1972-76) which likely depicts the artist during her imprisonment, with a matter-of-fact gaze and a defiant cigarette hanging from her mouth. Following her release from Holloway in November 1976, Mendelssohn moved to Cambridge where she studied English literature at St Edmund's College. From 1977 until 2009, Mendelssohn's poetic and artistic output was immense: filling nearly 800 notebooks, thousands of loose-leaf pages, and ephemera on which she inscribed everyday musings, research, poetry, and visual art.

Central to the exhibition is *Untitled (Relentless)* (c. 1997), a series of seven sheets illustrating a poem of the same name with acrylic, chalk, and pastel. As a visual artwork, Mendelssohn presents the poem as one to be engaged with at a different scale, amplifying the speaker's sense of urgency in its opening lines: "poetry races through / these streets, hitting / itself against stone walls". Elsewhere, Mendelssohn's *Untitled (Ideogram)* (c. 1980–1983) works signify the artist's fascination with written languages interpretable through symbolism or the pictorial such as Arabic and Chinese, while *Untitled (Key)* (c. 1970s-mid-1980s) sees her codifying natural phenomena, objects, metaphysics, and forms of speech as discrete, abstracted signs.

This exhibition takes its title from Mendelssohn's poem 'fragment; redundance; wordsworth.' (1996): "speak, poetess, speak in the end – / what has been Taken – / will always be being spoken to you".

Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess is curated by Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung, the 2023 Asymmetry Curatorial Fellow at Whitechapel Gallery, with Sara Crangle, Professor of Modernism & the Avant-Garde at the University of Sussex as curatorial consultant.

Notes to Editors

- *Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess* runs from 11 October 2023 – 21 January 2024.
- The display is curated by Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung, the 2023 Asymmetry Curatorial Fellow at Whitechapel Gallery, with Sara Crangle, Professor of Modernism & the Avant-Garde at the University of Sussex as curatorial consultant.
- With thanks to The Estate of Anna Mendelssohn, Karen Watson, Special Collections Archivist at University of Sussex, and University of Sussex Special Collections, and Peer Gallery.

About Whitechapel Gallery

Whitechapel Gallery was founded in 1901 to present "the finest art of the world for the people of the East End, London". More than one hundred and twenty years later, Whitechapel Gallery is renewing its founding mission under the directorship of Gilane Tawadros, recognising our unique role as a pioneering art institution that sits in the heart of London's East End and our global, diverse communities. We are proud to be a contemporary visual arts organisation that is locally embedded and globally connected.

In 1939, **Pablo Picasso's** iconic painting, *Guernica*, made its first and only visit to Britain, and artist premiers are as diverse as **Barbara Hepworth** (1954) and **Jackson Pollock** (1958), **Helio Oiticica** (1969) and **Gilbert & George** (1971), **Eva Hesse** (1979), **Frida Kahlo** (1982) and **Sonia Boyce** (1988), **Sophie Calle** (2010) and **Zarina Bhimji** (2012), **Emily Jacir**

(2015), **William Kentridge** (2016), **Theaster Gates** (2021) and **Nicole Eisenman** (2023). Influential surveys include *This is Tomorrow* (1956), *Liberty, Equality and Sisterhood* (1978), *From Two Worlds* (1986), *Woven Air* (1988) *Live in Your Head* (2000), *Back to Black* (2005), *Adventures of the Black Square* (2015) and *Electronic Superhighway* (2016).

Visitor Information

Gallery Admission: Free

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

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