

ANNA MENDELSSOHN: SPEAK, POETESS

Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess is the first institutional exhibition of the poet, writer, and artist Anna Mendelssohn (1948–2009), who was also known as Grace Lake. The display brings together 35 works from the Anna Mendelssohn Archive at University of Sussex Special Collections, which is the main repository of Mendelssohn's oeuvre, encompassing juvenilia to the poems written in her last days. 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. From language as a restless, poetic, and often sardonic device in her pastels, drawings, and manifestos, to language rendered anew as pictorial forms in her ideogrammatic works, Mendelssohn compels us to see how language is created, destroyed, sealed, and opened up by historical, political and personal events beyond our control – such as war, fascism, incarceration, loss, and other inequities.

Born in Stockport to Jewish, politicised, working-class parents, Mendelssohn was a first-generation university student who gravitated towards 1960s protest culture. 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. She was released on parole in November 1976, partly as a consequence of her teaching her fellow inmates literacy and drama. On display is the sketch *Untitled (Presumed Self-Portrait)* (c. 1972–76), which likely depicts the artist – with a matter-of-fact gaze and a cigarette hanging defiantly from her mouth – during her incarceration.

Following her release from Holloway, Mendelssohn moved between Stockport, Cambridge, and Sheffield, undertaking a series of fine art courses at Anglia and Sheffield City Polytechnics. In 1984, she began a degree at the University of Cambridge and resided in that city until her death. In the early 1980s, Mendelssohn welcomed the birth of three children who were later fostered; poverty, ill health, and fear of a return to litigation were contributing factors, and Mendelssohn never recovered from this loss. Throughout her life, Mendelssohn's poetic and artistic output was extraordinary, and she became a well-received poet in national and international vanguard circles. She left behind nearly 800 notebooks and thousands of loose sheets – among them, coffee filters, napkins, and pizza box linings – on which she inscribed everyday musings, research, poetry, and visual art. Taken together, undated loose-leaf pages such as *Untitled* (“*The world of poetry inhabits and moves in a world of its own*”) and *Untitled* (“*my eroticism is stirred by paint*”) reveal the complexity of her poetic style and interior life. Mendelssohn was an artist concerned with poetics and its imbrication with material conditions: “The world of poetry inhabits and moves in a world of its own. / It interests me philosophically in so much as it / proves to me that reality is unproveable”. While she conceptualised intimacy in her writing, she can be seen musing over the greater force that visual art might have in this endeavour: “my eroticism is stirred by paint / I am not good with words, words of love / ... but paint – show me a wall of paintings / ... show me a million paintings and / I would truly love”.

Mendelssohn's strengths as a writer and artist are evident in works such as *Untitled (Relentless)* (c. 1997), a series of seven sheets, each containing a single poetic stanza accompanied by drawings in chalk, acrylic, and pastel. Configured as a large visual artwork, Mendelssohn allows the poem to be engaged with at a different scale that intensifies the immediacy, urgency, and vertiginousness of lines such as "poetry races through / these streets, hitting / itself against stone walls". Elsewhere, the successive and evolving fine lines of her *Untitled (Ideogram)* (c. 1980–1983) works reference literary modernism's emphasis on the ideogram established by Ezra Pound, and echo the ink drawings of the Belgian–French poet, writer, and artist Henri Michaux. Importantly, they index Mendelssohn's lifelong fascination with written languages interpretable through symbolism or the pictorial such as Arabic and Chinese. The exhibition showcases five ideogrammatic works which are a testament to Mendelssohn's desire to create a lexicon which might disrupt accepted art historical semiotics and their conventional significations. Similarly, *Untitled (Key)* (c. 1970s–mid-1980s) sees the artist codifying natural phenomena, objects, metaphysics, and forms of speech as discrete, abstracted signs.

Many of Mendelssohn's fine line drawings are dense and tightly composed: featuring, amongst other things, landscapes which refract and fold in on themselves, impressions of modernist built environments and architectural forms suspended in space, fragments of – and references to – her poetry and writing, and figures which are individuated and drawn in profile, or, as choruses moving together in faceless processions. At times, Mendelssohn suggests that there is a mythological or historical valence to these drawings, as in *Untitled ("aphrodite")* (c. 1990–1993) and *Untitled ("Ebla: 3000 B.C.")* (undated). Echoing the dense and chaotic compositions of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's allegorical paintings, whirring with the drama and dynamism of Cubo–Futurism, and juxtaposing a variety of unexpected objects and scenes in line with the free association of images and text honed by the Surrealists, these fine line drawings attest to Mendelssohn's deep engagement with and reworking of art history.

Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess contextualises Mendelssohn as an artist working with and extending from the modernist tradition; aware of language as a tool that can break apart and reassemble the ways we understand our place in history. The exhibition title is Mendelssohn's own phrase, drawn from her poem "fragment; redundance; wordsworth." (1996): "speak, poetess, speak in the end – / what has been Taken – / will always be being spoken to you". Building on Mendelssohn's established and ascending reputation as a poet, this exhibition focuses on the ways her poetry and art communicate with each other, as well as in response to the wider world. There are – to paraphrase Mendelssohn – no "precise directions" in her theatre of language, signs, and forms. But if there are coordinates which one might map between these works, they arguably lead us towards a better understanding of the kinship between language, art, and volition, and the ways in which we can desire and collectively imagine lives less wounded by history.

Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung
Curator of *Anna Mendelssohn: Speak, Poetess*