TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 23

Anna Mendelssohn

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

RM1: Hello and welcome to *Hear, Now*, Whitechapel Gallery's podcast where we delve behind the scenes to discuss some of the ideas and the stories behind our programme here in the heart of East London. My name is Richard Martin, I'm director of education and public programmes at the gallery. And in today's episode we're going to be talking about one of our new autumn exhibitions called Anna Mendelssohn, 'Speak, Poetess'.

The exhibition runs at Whitechapel Gallery from 11 October 2023 until the 21 January 2024. And we're actually recording this during the installation period so we might be talking about the show in that strange mixture of present and future tense. Anna Mendelssohn's 'Speak, Poetess' is the first institutional exhibition of the poet, writer and artist, Anna Mendelssohn, who was born in 1948 and died in 2009 and who was also known as Grace Lake.

The exhibition is curated here at Whitechapel by Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung who is asymmetry curatorial fellow here at Whitechapel and that's a partnership between us and our friends at the Asymmetry Art Foundation and the Delfina Foundation. And I want to thank them for their support on this project.

The display brings together 35 works from the Anna Mendelssohn archive at the University of Sussex Special Collections, which is the main repository of Mendelssohn's oeuvre. And that archive was brought to the University of Sussex by Professor Sara Crangle, who is professor of modernism and the avant-garde at

Sussex and who is the curatorial consultant for this exhibition and who I'm delighted to say joins me in conversation today. Welcome, Sara.

SC: Thank you.

RM1: And I'm also delighted that we're joined by Professor Rod Mengham, who is professor of modern English literature at the University of Cambridge and who is a specialist in 19th and 20th century English literature and contemporary fiction and poetry. Thanks for joining us, Rod.

RM2: Thanks very much. Good to be here.

RM1: So along with Sara and Rod, we're going to be talking about Anna Mendelssohn's work, about her relationship with language and pictorial forms, about some of the key themes of the exhibition here. And to start with, Rod, I'd like us to introduce Anna Mendelssohn perhaps to audiences who might be less familiar with this incredibly compelling 20th century political and cultural figure, and someone who I know that you met and you knew. Could you introduce Anna Mendelssohn?

RM2: Well I first met Anna way back in 1977 at the Cambridge Poetry Festival in that year, without really knowing who she was. She'd actually been out of prison only a few months. And she was in the company of an...a really essential English poet, Tom Raworth. And she was very shy, very pleased to be there in the company of poets, but not speaking very much, which was understandable.

I next met her ten years later when she interrupted my lecture with a very, very difficult question that turned in to a speech. And she was furious basically at some of the claims I was making about performance art which had a political edge, in other words political activism which had some kind of artistic expression.

I heard nothing from her for a few weeks and then received a letter saying, I've decided basically that you're alright, because at least you're the only person in the place addressing these issues. Can we meet? I was terrified at this prospect but agreed to meet her and we spent a long time at a café getting to know one another and listening to one another. On that occasion, I listened to her more than she listened to me. And we developed a relationship in which we talked about poetry and talked about possibility of publishing Anna's work. And eventually I managed to publish a couple of chapbooks of her work and eventually a full length book, Implacable Art. So that's the story of my engagement with Anna while she was still with us.

RM1: Thank you, Rod. We're going to talk a little bit more about the tricky questions around biography and subjectivity. So I'm loathed to just begin this discussion but thinking about personal history here, but could you say something...you mentioned that when you first met Anna, she'd recently been released from prison. Could you say a little bit about the context for that?

SC: I can maybe just jump in here if that's okay. Yeah. First of all, Rod is being typically self-effacing here because we are really indebted to his press and his work in having a lot of Mendelssohn's poetry ever seeing the light of day in terms of publication and he's a really pivotal figure in her world and in establishing herself as a poet.

Anna Mendelssohn was born in Stockport near Manchester and was very proud and invested in the fact that she was from Northern England. She was born to Jewish parents whose parents had been migrants. They were working class and very politicised. And she attended state schools and was a first generation university scholar in her family and went to the University of Essex where she became involved in the late 1960s culture of democratic protest.

And like many people around the world, particularly students, many of them from Jewish backgrounds interestingly, she became involved in the late '60s/early '70s in extremist activism. There's a trip to turkey in there somewhere where I think she was also involved in extremist activism as well.

But she starts doing a lot of work around squatting and squatters' rights in London. She's also very heavily invested in nursery provision for young mothers. So she's got a lot of very interesting and still current political interests and she becomes involved with a group called the 'Angry Brigade'. They set off over 25 bombs for which they laid claim in communiqués and they were an extreme leftist group.

Their political affiliations...work needs to be done on some of those political affiliations I think but in essence, extreme leftism I think is a good way to, kind of, define them.

The bombs were deliberately set off in places where people were not in place, so it was not about hurting people, it was about sending political messages. So this is very consistent with groups like Baader–Meinhof in Germany or the Weathermen in the United States.

A trial happens, Anna is arrested along with seven other people, the Stoke Newington Eight Trial in 1972 lasts for over six months and its at that time the longest criminal trial in British history. It's only been superseded by the phone hacking trial that happened recently, is the one that's now the longest. And she is sentenced to ten years for conspiracy to set off explosives. And the evidence against her is her fingerprints on a page of Rolling Stone magazine in a bag where there were 14 sets of fingerprints, 11 of which were never identified. So it's never clear to us that she was actually one of the people who did set off any of these bombs.

In any case, she goes to Royal Holloway. She spends five years there and is politically active within prison as well, so she's teaching literacy to prisoners, she's setting up dramatic productions. She runs the production of Peter Pan, where she casts herself as Captain Hook. And she is let off on parole in 1976. And so she serves only five years of a ten year sentence.

Another media furore around this, ‘cause parole is still a fairly…there’s a lot of people who don’t think she should be out of prison fundamentally, so the press goes wild over this, as they did with the trial.

And then she moves around a little bit, back to Stockport, to Sheffield, to Cambridge. She tries to take some art courses at Sheffield Polytechnic – what is now known as Anglia Ruskin – ends up back in Cambridge in the early ‘80s and undertakes…to undertake a degree in English literature.

Along the way she has three children. The children were very much wanted and very beloved children. She starts going to school. She never finishes the degree and the children are ultimately fostered at the end of the 1980s and this is because of a lot of reasons, poverty, ill health, and she had a great fear of going back to court to, sort of, fight for her rights as a parent. And from that loss, she never really recovers. But along the ways she’s producing untold amounts of art and literature. She writes all the time.

I brought her archive to Sussex in 2010. It was very generously donated by those three children. And it's been our care at Sussex Special Collections. It’s now the most looked at archive at Sussex, which holds the Woolf papers and Mass Observation. So we have some very prestigious archives. This is the one people gravitate towards, which is quite interesting.

It’s huge. It’s absolutely huge. There’s upward of 800 notebooks in it. She just wrote and drew all the time. And I’ve estimated somewhere between five and ten

thousand poems in this archive. It's just absolutely enormous. It's beautiful because she draws and writes constantly and...so it's an absolutely gorgeous archive.

So I've been very closely working with this archive now for about, yeah, 12 or 13 years and have edited a collection of her poetry. It's a critical edition, so it's very long, it's an 800 page book trying to show her workings and how she edited her work. And now...though she did produce some of her own artwork in Implacable Art, so that is a book of poetry and artwork, but as you say, this is the first institutional exhibition of her artwork. Yeah.

RM1: And across this enormous range of work that she produced and incredibly prolific career, there's a particular fascination with language and with experimenting with language. And I wonder if you could both say something about what's distinctive about Mendelssohn's relationship with language.

RM2: Well it's remarkable I suppose in one way in that it comes out of an experience of intense isolation, often from...you know, isolation from anybody who will believe what you're saying, but an art of isolation which results in alienation and feelings of rejection. But it is quite obviously constantly about the need for engagement and it addresses the reader, you know, as a form of engagement that the reader cannot avoid. And there's an insatiable appetite I think that's on display in all this work in, you know...in all the forms of artistic expression that she uses, which is constantly projecting this engagement with the

reader. It's a one sided conversation but it's constantly provoking response and conversation with the reader. And it's impossible not to take it in that spirit.

RM1: What kind of reader or viewer do you think Mendelssohn had in mind? Did she have a...an ideal respondent to her work?

SC: Rod's absolutely correct, that there's a lot of second person pronoun – you, you, you – in the poetry, right. And you often identify as that you. But that you changes, I think. That you is sometimes someone she's very angry with. But also she will appeal to that you. So Mendelssohn...she pleaded innocent in her trial and for her whole life maintained that she did not do the things that...and there's something...there is some way in which the writing itself is asking you to understand her version of events and her version of stories and her version of her life. It's not autobiographical. And she's very resistant to using the first person pronoun.

And the thing that I've noticed the most absolutely consistent edit makes in her poetry is to exercise the first person pronoun, right. She doesn't want it to be about her own life and she doesn't want you to interpret that, because she was over interpreted by the press, she was over interpreted by society.

And...but nevertheless, she both is asking for that intimacy all the time, you come into the poem with me, be here in this poem with me, but she's also pushing you away, no you will never understand my

circumstances, right. So there's this feeling always of rebuttal as well as coming closer.

It's a very provoking place to be but it's also a slightly...a fascinating place to be. People who love her work become wholly absorbed in that nexus, I think.

RM1: Do we know much about the writers and the artists that inspired Mendelssohn?

SC: I've tried to keep a list which is one of the most insane things I think I've ever tried to do in my life. Because her range of source text...I mean, she was a voracious, voracious reader so from Norse mythology to the lyrics from Velvet Underground songs, there are so many allusions in her work to other...right. So, I mean, there are some Shakespeare and Wordsworth...she's very canonically oriented at times, but the vast majority of her reference...references and allusions are from post-1850 European avant-garde movement. So she's very, very interested in lot of European figures.

She's also...she loves Gorky, she loves Dostoevsky, she wanted to write a PhD on H.D., Hilda Doolittle, the poet. She also wanted to write...who's not a continental source, but spent a lot of time on the continent, Nancy Cunard was very interesting. She's quite interested in women writers.

But her reading literally ranges from Edmund Husserl and phenomenology, to Melanie Klein psychoanalysis. I mean, in any given notebook of these 800 notebooks that I'm describing, there will be 40 references to

artists and thinkers and musicians that she's...and she's constantly writing down call numbers from the Cambridge University Library, 'cause she's going and finding these books and spending time with them, and the depth of her engagement. But there's, kind of, a magpie-ish quality to it.

But the thing that holds it together is a, kind of...a modernist avant-garde tradition that's, kind of, very post-1850 and starts in Europe. Yeah.

RM1: Rod, were there artists or writers that Mendelssohn would talk about a lot or with particular passion?

RM2: Well, names cropped up, there were none that seemed to be particularly...she was obsessive about. I think she was on a process of discovery and she exhibited...every time I met her, she exhibited excitement at new discoveries. I mean, I suppose a few names came round and stayed. Probably... Gisèle Prassinos. She liked the example of women writers in particular and found parallels in the situations of women who'd had difficult situations in terms of getting...you know, getting a hearing for their voices in one way or another. And visual artists as well, Käthe Kollwitz who had a...you know, work which had a very, kind of, political grounding and a very political motivation.

I think she was, you know, in this respect, looking at the expressions of powerlessness that historically many women artists have experienced. I mean, I think she was furious about those who have no power and who had taken advantage of and perhaps one of her

most abiding motivations for writing was to, kind of, give a voice in situations of...where she had detected social injustice. I mean, I think that's one of her, kind of...one of the things she hated most, social injustice.

RM1: In the context of thinking about gender and her interest in women writers, I wonder if we could talk about the title of this show, 'Speak, Poetess'. And poetess is a term that is received very differently by very different people and is a term with its own controversy attached to it. I wonder, what did this term mean to Mendelssohn? What did it mean to you?

SC: I'm really glad you asked this question because I have some concerns about the interpretation of the title for the reasons you've just identified. In the archive, she starts using this term 'poetess' in the early 1980s and by the late 1990s, it's an absolutely firm and entrenched part of her diction, so it just appears everywhere.

But it's really important to understand that she recognises it as an archaic term, right, a, kind of, outdated term. But she also wants to radicalise it. So...but she's got a really good sense of humour. And that is something we ought to completely foreground is that there's such wit in so much of her writing. So she...some of her poems will make fun of this expression, 'poetess', right. 'Oh parasite poetess', she'll write, or, 'problematic dreamy poetess', right. There's a, kind of, satire of the figure of the poetess. 'Tangerine organdie poetess'.

But she...so she's constantly poking fun of it...at it, rather. But she also recognises that the experience of the woman writer is so completely different from the experience of the male writer that she wants a label for that. That's very important to her.

And so one of her last published poems starts feminized, although not without dissent', and I think this is the perfect description of the word 'poetess', is, I'm going to use deliberately that very feminised term, but as a form of dissent, right. As a way of saying, you haven't listened enough to the female writer, and so I'm going to exaggerate her femininity and how you have feminised her as well as the fact that she is...identifies as female.

RM1: It's tempting given the controversy attached to Mendelssohn's political activism in the late 1960s and in...and the 1970s to read the politics of her work in quite crude or narrow terms, but I wonder, what would you say characterises the politics of her writing and her drawing practices, here artistic output? And can we draw any connections with the political activism or is that too obvious a direction?

SC: It's a really important question about her work. And it's a question that, particularly in her later years when she's writing page after page every day, almost every single page starts with, I am not a political writer. I am not a political writer. I...you think I'm political, I am not political. And she wants...I've tried to write about this and I can only write about it as a paradox because it's an impossible situation. On the one hand, she's profoundly aware of that, kind of,

second wave feminist mantra, that personal is political, right.

And she wants this, kind of, personal exoneration and this recognition of the coordinates of her own personal history through her writing, and many other things.

On the other hand, she never stops being leftist. She never stops thinking really about social justice in terms it could only be defined in that way, right. So she's very angry about the miners' strikes in the early '80s in England right through to, you know, the later decisions that are getting made by governments. She's constantly, constantly at odds with the politics of her time in ways that continue to be hugely politicised.

But she wants a place in her world that is not touched by politics. And this is of course not possible, but she wants it because she feels that her engagement with an extreme leftist organisation had such an enormous and devastating impact on her own life. And she needs art to be a space that is pure and free of that.

So she keeps saying that. But she has to keep saying it because she knows, I think, it's impossible, right. So it becomes this, kind of, obsessive repetition in her work. And she's very angry at any suggestion that she is a political poet, but from any other perspective, of course the work is full of politics and is a response to a lot of those things.

But I understand her need for a, kind of, space that's free of something that was so damaging. She needs that reprieve somehow from the world of politics, so she keeps telling us that's what she's doing. Yeah.

RM1: Rod, what are your thoughts on the politics of Mendelssohn's work?

RM2: I think she's a political poet but she overwhelmingly appears to withdraw from being located/identified as a political animal because it's inevitably linked, for her, with being misunderstood. Her political activism is something that leads to her being misunderstood. And she writes to be understood but understood as something much more complicated and subtle and nuanced than any of the labels that are inevitably going to be, you know, stuck on her. She's trying to present a much more complex idea of herself than that initial placement would ever allow, I think.

RM1: This is a very difficult question to ask of an exhibition, but what would you hope this exhibition might inspire? Do you think that there are new avenues for thinking about Mendelssohn's work that will come out of the work that's on display here? How widely known do you think she is now? Is she taught, is she studied, is she...is her work receiving a kind of attention that you think it merits?

SC: It's really important to remember that she positioned herself as an avant-garde writer, right. She doesn't like mass culture and she's very adamant about that, and never wanted to be a popular writer or artist in any way, shape or form.

As an avant-garde writer, and again people…we are very indebted to people like Rod for helping her to get to places of completion with her work. She's immensely good at starting things and very bad at finishing things, as far as I can tell, including degrees. Including degrees.

So what we do take away from this enormous legacy? I mean, I teach her a lot and I struggle when I teach her because I think my students, who are young and have wonderful, wonderful aspirations for the world, want to embrace her kind of radical history in some ways without too much critique of that radical history.

And I think there's so much that her history teaches us about the relationship between politics and aesthetics. And she's an amazing example of someone who was both an extremist activist and an avant-garde writer. And that relationship between politics and aesthetics has been just debated over and over again. To be avant-garde, must she be a politically active human being, right. This has informed theories of avant-gardism forever.

But she's also as important in terms of her…the quality of her work, which I believe I whole heartedly, and the…her historical importance, which I also believe in. She's also just a phenomenal figure to think about the consequences of some of our decisions, right.

And she…she's interesting in that she spends a lot of time reflecting on what it means to have tried various

parts of, kind of, extremist activism and has found them lacking. And that's the kind of...there's a, kind of, inevitable humility and mistakenness and regret there that I...is the thing I want to give the people that I talk to about Mendelssohn, is that...have that utopianism but also think about its long term consequences.

We're in a similarly very vexed time right now, as Mendelssohn was, and there's a lot of protest movements on the go. And she's a really interesting figure to think about, like, the long term effects of some of those decisions you make as an artist and an activist 'cause they had real consequences in her world. And so she becomes a, kind of, phenomenal test case for a lot of thinking I think, yeah.

RM2: I can't really add to that very much except to say that it's absolutely essential to come to the exhibition to understand the extent to which the pictorial is, you know, an essential element in Anna's work. And, you know, for the most part, people either encounter the texts in books with only a few of the illustrations or they see the artwork with only fragmentary text incorporated.

And in order to understand how she was constantly...not switching between the verbal and the visual, but in...trying to integrate them in various ways throughout her work, is the only way you can understand the, kind of...the organic relationship between the two throughout her work. So I think it's a fantastic opportunity for people to understand exactly

what kind of artist she was, what kind of writer she was, which is what kind of artist she was.

RM1: Shall we hear some of Mendelssohn's poetry? Rod, would you like to share one of her poems?

RM2: Okay. This poem is untitled. It begins with the phrase, 'I don't know which colour to choose.'

'I don't know which colour to choose. The blue I dreamt is untranslatable. I sense the rote of priorities, food, clothes, shelter, culture, art. Bound around the room in the fixed photographs, dishes are slammed down, another flash kidnap strings tied enough to burn in to the ingratitude I have been told that I have shown, exposition in gratitude. I am returned to the bowing and scraping sounds violin. The monstrous regimen throws back its jaws. It has now become hell in full scenario. You were always vile, which I knew. Which is why there is no reply plunged up to my repetitive role syndrome. The word is enough. I fit in. But the problem remains, how, without the Second World War, can I possibly in the presence of relentless realism get it right.'

RM1: Thank you, Rod. And it's worth pointing out that the reference to the untranslatable blue there is partly the inspiration for the heavenly blue walls of the exhibition here at Whitechapel Gallery.

SC: I shall just introduce this work, which is that when we catalogued Anna Mendelssohn's archive in 2014/2015, the archivist located within her papers a series of typescript pages and also so manuscript

pages that were of a completely different tenure than some of the other writing that we'd found in the archive.

And he slowly started accumulating this. And we had a conversation about it. And he said, I think it's a memoire of some kind. But Anna Mendelssohn being Anna Mendelssohn, it's in no way a confessional autobiography. There are other women who are involved in extremist activism like Susan Stern and Jane Alpert who've written about working with the Weathermen, were…various other forms of activism. And they've written these very confessional memoires. And this is not Anna Mendelssohn's style. And the piece in…that she was writing, she was writing over a period of I think about 20 years. It's very episodic. It's not chronological. It's not starting with childhood and moving to…so it's a very, kind of, fictionalised account. And she calls it her, kind of…her novel at some points, but it surely has references to events that have happened in her life.

So I'm just going to read an extract from one of the more, kind of, experimental portions of it. There are some slightly more realist but we'll see how this goes. Yeah. So this piece, I think, is dated between '81 and '85.

'Rolling on, rolling home, mind over matter. The nature of the discontent, interruption, beat it backwards, all of a jumble, five by five, two by two, drag, drudge, misspelled, a smell, an ejection. Very kind of you, was a toff humour, unreliable, no not. Danger forthwith, speak softly to your child,

anticipation, a lot of gurgles, and a free friend. Freedom has a price to pay. With your heart is a one time chance, speak. I, in ignorance, and don't look sideways for support. We are being gunned down, the line. Running the gauntlet. Women are nothing was the message. Their experience counts for not. Maybe a law unto themselves as though we've got to get on with the job. Run away with yourself. Always happen in relation to men. Be bolder, little girl, you have to take their syncopation. If not, you are a lesbian or newly heard, you can't jump off.

A member of the new hormone group. That reminds you of fascism too. No love involved. We don't want you back telling us what to do as though this was a very real message being received by me. And it comes in, you are a Jew, a soft, sickly Jewess who knows too much for her own good. All I saw was Nazism and incipient Nazism and my best friend learned to psychologise me for the bourgeoise. Lazy media, flashing faces round corners. Always grabbing a motive in that.

I wanted to be a psychiatrist too. Having coped with illiterate people's problems for so long, I became illiterate. Searching then giving up. Not communicating, even with my own family who have led a close existence and don't know what it was like to be young in 1960. I want to understand my child's needs, but they're going to bomb us, the whole damn lot of them. Left, right and centre Russians, English, Americans, surely not the Chinese. The Chinese people don't even know why. People never do.

They agree with things they don't even know about because all the secrets are locked up in boxes. And the Tories say Wedgie Benn is a fanatic, and I don't think he is, for wanting to help poor people and to ban the bomb, which would be very brave. But I'm poor too. Why not be neutral and defy the world? I hate TV for making us fiction. Is that irrational? I don't have many heartfelt friends. I gave up on that score because I want a piece of the cake which aforesaid cynical expression was levelled at me by a friend I thought I had helped. We are squashed together. No wonder my right arm shakes. And I think they have labelled me a Nazi, me who hates fascism.

I'd rather be in Africa, but I don't think I can subscribe to set curricula of set Marxist dogma. Was ten days that shook the world a waste? That turned me on the head and made sense. The University of Strasbourg. Real love. Why love real with a great big inflection going upright. How wonderful to be that intelligent, that funnily intelligent, that all embracingly, artistically, comically and very really intelligent with romance off the screen.

That's what they used to write, with funny little typeset dated photos from West Berlin underground movement, and I want to say a downer. To be rude, to be mean, to be angry with purpose to say this and down deep mean it. For as long as it takes to disappear, I wish all those people like Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, Picasso, were still speaking. Matisse was their friend. Delacroix's horse fell backward and the man with the great big mouth was out as in former times, as big daddy, yes, with a lot

more back. It went back and back, psychological brain damage. A perfect fait accompli, less in the feet, smart up. A pick morse, that's the only line to my poem.

But whilst we're out on the streets, well garbed, we'll be coming home to talk. Not to read readings out. But I don't know enough yet. Why did I stop reading? I find love, God, how crass. We can't afford it. I do understand the priority but I didn't ever dare take you seriously which is about level . . . isn't it? right. Under the chuppah has changed to vat a chutzpa. Can't conform. She bleedingly took all my career and dropped it on the floor, which wasn't worth much monetarily but it's all I have to score, then that would be taken up in her search for peer, peer, peer.

I wondered what Catholic taste was for ages. Kept looking it up. Kept forgetting. I hate being flattered. I would like to get on. Don't think what it's like, but it's all pornography. That means I'm out. I don't know. Twisted glue and dilly-dally that serves a grand finale. Don't ever read this writing.'

RM1: Thank you so much for sharing that, Sara.

SC: Thanks.

RM1: That was great. Thank you so much to Professor Sara Crangle and Professor Rod Mengham for joining me for this discussion. And a reminder and an invitation to join us at Whitechapel Gallery for the exhibition, Anna Mendelssohn, 'Speak, Poetess', which is on display here until 21 January 2024. Thank you so

much for listening and look forward to seeing you in person or online very soon.

Transcribed by 1st Class Secretarial Services.