

Ben Hall

Painting & Printmaking (Year 3)

for Margaret Salmon

Image/ Performance/ Sound/ Montage: Foundations of Film
as Text

a New Platea

a Source review approaching platforming in touchless space

Decades deep into the 'Information Age,' present channels of arts consumption are reaching their adolescence. The work of British poet JH Prynne and London-based curator Shama Khanna epistemologically illustrate both the embrace of *new* new media and the lack of understanding of it. Prynne's work is infamous for its opacity, and in its sensibility toward commercial posturing it seems prescient of spaces figures like Khanna are moving into. I will focus on parallel academic reactions to Prynne's poetry and then progress to Khanna's perhaps misguided contemporary attempt to actuate some of Prynne's ideas on spaces of platforming.

*Nearly Too Much*¹ is a 'lively'² but deeply flawed study of Prynne's oeuvre by two of his Gonville and Caius ex-students; NH Reeve and Richard Kerridge. Their self-declared enterprise is to 'mediate between [Prynne's] radicalism and the more familiar ways of organising discourse it so thoroughly rejects.'³ Perhaps admirable, but I would argue that with this as their maxim *Nearly Too Much* was fated to fail in its understanding of Prynne's poetry from the outset. This requires some explanation of the locus of Prynne's work. Notoriously distant and difficult, Prynne is often labelled as the 'Stockhausen of modern poetry'⁴ and is known for weaving loose syntactic structures filled with 'the languages and findings'⁵ of an array of disciplines: for example computer coding terminology and geological jargon. Fellow Cambridge poetry fellows Rod Mengham and John Kinsella describe this effect as a 'reach beyond'⁶ of conventional modes and a 'registering of lateral pressures'⁷ upon the readers experience of the poem. Thus there is 'no point of view being transcribed'⁸ by Prynne here, instead in the whizzing indeterminacy of his poetry he creates a 'twilight';⁹ a 'temporary public sphere'¹⁰ for 'poetic interaction'¹¹ beyond the measures of society, within which the reader can internalise his feeling and politics. With this understanding of the poetic 'platea' from which Prynne intends his voice to speak, *Nearly Too Much* can be seen as a contamination of his discourse, and its usefulness as a source on Prynne's thought becomes significantly diminished. He stands against the 'ethical

¹ Reeve, N. and Kerridge, R. *Nearly Too Much* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995)

² Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

³ Reeve, N. and Kerridge, R. *Nearly Too Much* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995)

⁴ Wheatley, D. *Poems by JH Prynne Review - 'the ultimate poet of "anti-pathos"'* (United Kingdom, 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/08/poems-jh-prynne-review> [Accessed 8/12/18]

⁵ Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ McClintock, K. *Review: Poems, by JH Prynne* (United Kingdom 2015)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281374163_1_Review_Poems_by_JH_Prynne [Accessed 8/12/18]

¹⁰ Middleton, P. *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26(4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

¹¹ Ibid

disaster¹² of inscribing any one language with the standards and judgements of another, but in their pursuit of 'explanations, glosses, and maps'¹³ as a means for 'transferable understanding'¹⁴ Reeve and Kerridge remain in 'a form of denial; a refusal to face up to the moral and political impasse of contemporary selfhood.'¹⁵ Their 'commitment to close reading'¹⁶ has led to an epistemological misunderstanding; a linear interpretation of a poetry only ever meant to be understood vertically, structurally, and from an abstracted platform. Such a commitment is explicable by the provenance of *Nearly Too Much* in that both authors are ex-students of Prynne. Perhaps such intimacy with the poet engendered in the co-authors a sense of privileged authority - perhaps duty - to the less enlightened to expunge their insight. Throughout their book they imagine the reader as a confused soul, lost in a battle with Prynne's indeterminacies. Peter Middleton's highly measured and sceptical review¹⁷ of *Nearly Too Much* vehemently attacks Reeve and Kerridge with on this account; rejecting their use of 'projected bafflement'¹⁸ to 'tacitly allow their status to authorise their hermeneutic efforts.'¹⁹ Academic egoism is potentially attributable to their idolation of Prynne's poetry where suspension of its reputation as impenetrable becomes imperative. 'Difficulty is treated as a mark of distinction'²⁰ in and of itself, when such a surface level maxim completely ignores the profundity of the poems. In fact, one could surmise that Prynne's difficult reputation is the sales thrust of *Nearly Too Much* and the foundation for Reeve and Kerridge's intellectual credentials - their interpretation disempowers the reader and shortly after proffers them the keys to the castle. Seeking to separate their 'philosopher-king'²¹ from common discourse is counter to Prynne's strictures - a forced conservatism in a field where Prynne was egalitarian by his own admission. An underground 'alien who won't see how / much he is at home'²² in the mundane surely attests to his emphatic belief in the 'cross linking'²³ of poetry and life. Despite all this, and somewhat uncomfortably, nowhere in *Nearly Too Much* do its co-authors admit their special relationship with their subject; unwilling to admit the privilege any reader outside of Oxbridge academia will probably be unaware of. While their lack of 'cash-in' on their status is applaudable, such a corroboration of their unreliability leads Middleton to judge the co-authors 'not trustworthy,'²⁴ a view shared by

¹² Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

¹³ Middleton, P. *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26(4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

¹⁶ Middleton, P. *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26(4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Prynne, J. *Questions for the Time Being* in Pattison, R, Roberts, L and Pattison, N. *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (London: Mountain Press, 2012)

²³ Prynne, J. *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words: the William Matthews lectures 1992 delivered at Birkbeck College, London* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993)

²⁴ Ibid

myself and multiple online reviews, such as Tim Love's *Litrefs* piece.²⁵ Middleton's mature *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne*²⁶ is a more sympathetic and sensitive account of Prynne's poetry, and one that values roughly the same cadences of expression that Prynne has spoken of in his public lectures.²⁷ It is somewhat surprisingly at less of an epistemic distance from Prynne than his own ex-students' account. Middleton is an accomplished professor of English at the University of Southampton with no personal relationship to Prynne, and his review published in an academic journal, and therefore the provenance of *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* is far less charged than that of his reviewees - Middleton's ulterior motive is only to impress fellow academics with holistic and informative reactions to poetry. It's important to note that despite their poor utilisation of it, Reeve and Kerridge's special relationship with Prynne clearly makes *Nearly Too Much* a significant source, but it's my feeling that it must be treated as a phenomenological account of an encounter with Prynne the man, and not a firmly substantiated and illuminating take on his poetry. While Middleton has come to feel his evisceration of Reeve and Kerridge 'too harsh and ungenerous'²⁸ and its scope allows only for transient comments on the specifics of Prynne's poetry, I see his review as a far more valid source speaking on the epistemology and use of a plateau in Prynne's work.

Shama Khanna's ongoing *Flatness* project²⁹ is a present day attempt to platform screen-based arts from the same twilight space which Prynne's poetry inhabits, though I feel her enterprise an unsuccessful one. After beginnings as a film programme,³⁰ *Flatness* became a website, book and screening series curated by Khanna. The language she uses to illustrate her intentions certainly evokes the comparison to Prynne's indeterminacy; a website which is 'neutral while claiming not to be'³¹ as it writes large the presence of a 'hand driving the machine.'³² *Flatness* is a project intended to reflect 'a temporal shift; non-representational modes of expression, circular narratives'³³ and the 'blurring between work and social time,'³⁴ in doing so becoming a 'regularly updated'³⁵ platform where many 'partial and idiosyncratic'³⁶ screen-based

²⁵ Love, T. "Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of JH Prynne" by NH Reeve and Richard Kerridge (United Kingdom, 2009) <http://litrefsreviews.blogspot.com/2009/01/nearly-too-much-poetry-of-jh-prynne-by.html> [Accessed 7/12/18]

²⁶ Middleton, P. *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26(4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

²⁷ Prynne, J. *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words: the William Matthews lectures 1992 delivered at Birkbeck College, London* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993)

²⁸ Middleton, P. *Re: Question from a Reader* Message to Ben Hall (12/12/18) [Email]

²⁹ Khanna, S. *Flatness.eu* (United Kingdom, 2013) <http://flatness.eu/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

³⁰ *International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen 2013* (Germany, 2013) <https://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/festival/looking-back/2013/festival-catalogue/> [Accessed 10/12/18]

³¹ Khanna, S and Ward, D. *Flatness: an interview with Shama Khanna* (New York City, 2015) <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/21/flatness-interview-shama-khanna/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

³² *Ibid*

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ Khanna, S. *FLATNESS* (London, 2013) <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/your-posts/flatness> [Accessed 8/12/18]

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ Khanna, S and Ward, D. *Flatness: an interview with Shama Khanna* (New York City, 2015) <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/21/flatness-interview-shama-khanna/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

works can be 'appreciated in the same space.'³⁷ While contributing artists like Ed Atkins³⁸ and Anthea Hamilton were clearly integral to *Flatness*' inception, Khanna emphatically posits herself as the central figure of the project; in no uncertain terms its *curator*. I find much of Khanna's intent admirable, but when comparing the current state of *Flatness*' online space to its pseudo-foundational texts I was disappointed: it is partially defunct. There is no work on *flatness.eu* that dates later than 2013, and many of the links to works (and indeed information) lead to a 404 message - the corresponding pages no longer exist.³⁹ You can no longer watch Atkins' or Hamilton's films on the site, despite it originally being created to host work shown in the initial screening.⁴⁰ Khanna's insistence on her role as curator and on including traditional channels in *Flatness* may be to blame for the faltering of the in-between, public space that it could have been. Perhaps she instigated an 'ethical disaster'⁴¹ by continually inscribing the importance of 're-imagining the gallery'⁴² upon the collisions talented artists where making on her website, contaminating them with the values of the gallerist. For instance, Khanna has 'curatorially'⁴³ articulated that without imposition of cinema on social media-based expression the latter becomes 'politically ambivalent and historically content-less.'⁴⁴ A parallel example may illustrate Khanna's failing. Musician and artist James Ferraro is a chief proponent of 'hyperindividuality'⁴⁵ and the 'bizarre kinds of ways'⁴⁶ creative communities flourish in online spaces. He attributes the creative decline of vaporwave - a musical subgenre he spearheaded - to the supersedence of 'technically skilled musicians'⁴⁷ in the scene by 'curators'⁴⁸ of the style's signature sound. Furthermore he speaks of our 'feudal bondage'⁴⁹ to tech-giants (such as Facebook) in the sense that we submit our data to them. Khanna can be seen as the link in the feudal chain above creative work, unwittingly subsuming the energies of her contributors into the institutional systems of the fine art community. She seems unappreciative of the fact *Flatness* therefore doesn't have 'complete leeway to construct meanings at leisure'⁵⁰ and - to

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Khanna, S and Atkins, E. *Ed Atkins: "Death Mask 2 & 3"* (2011)

<http://www.vdrome.org/ed-atkins-death-mask-2-3> [Accessed 6/12/18]

³⁹ Khanna, S. *Flatness.eu* (United Kingdom, 2013) <http://flatness.eu/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

⁴⁰ Khanna, S and Ward, D. *Flatness: an interview with Shama Khanna* (New York City, 2015)

<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/21/flatness-interview-shama-khanna/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

⁴¹ Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

⁴² Khanna, S and Ward, D. *Flatness: an interview with Shama Khanna* (New York City, 2015)

<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/21/flatness-interview-shama-khanna/> [Accessed 9/12/18]

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ferraro, J and Kalev, M. *James Ferraro: Bizarre rides to the far side* in *The Wire Issue 416* (United Kingdom, October 2018)

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Middleton, P. *Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground: Language in Contemporary UK Poetry* in Laing, A. and Nowell Smith, D. *Modernist Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015)

invoke Prynne - the project's 'language system is mapped onto determinations and coercions'⁵¹ of arts business. *Flatness* is missing the true openness and vaguity which facilitates the internalisation of arts in the Prynne tradition - perhaps lacking his 'radical irony'⁵² on the topic of the arts' political role. *Flatness* still exists, but now firmly as a curatorial practice within traditional channels. I saw a show Khanna curated in Glasgow⁵³ this year and enjoyed it, but feel her achievements do not align with her expansive intentions of a few years ago.

In conclusion; Khanna, Middleton, Reeve and Kerridge all give insight into the topic of epistemology surrounding the platforming of arts in indeterminate, twilight spaces. Middleton's review is the most valid in terms of the argument it sustains, whereas *Nearly Too Much* acts as a source made intriguing by its cloying subjectivity. Khanna can be seen as an example of Prynne-adjacent principles being misapplied - *Flatness* is illustrative of what is in my estimation an epistemological failure. Middleton is assuredly the most scrupulously rigorous in the academic sense, but adding the context of the others' work makes for a more holistic appreciation of my topic.

⁵¹ Prynne, J. in Middleton, P. *Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground: Language in Contemporary UK Poetry* in Laing, A. and Nowell Smith, D. *Modernist Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015)

⁵² Middleton, P. *Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground: Language in Contemporary UK Poetry* in Laing, A. and Nowell Smith, D. *Modernist Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015)

⁵³ *Rehana Zeman Speaking Nearby* (Glasgow: CCA, 10/2/18-25/3/18) [Exhibition]

Bibliography

- Reeve, N. and Kerridge, R. *Nearly Too Much* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995)
- Mengham, R and Kinsella, J. *An Introduction to the Poetry of JH Prynne* in Prynne, J. *Collected Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)
- Wheatley, D. *Poems by JH Prynne Review - 'the ultimate poet of "anti-pathos"'* (United Kingdom, 2015)
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/08/poems-jh-prynne-review> [Accessed 8/12/18]
- McClintock, K. *Review: Poems, by JH Prynne* (United Kingdom 2015)
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281374163_1_Review_Poems_by_JH_Prynne [Accessed 8/12/18]
- Middleton, P. *Not Nearly Too Much Prynne* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26(4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Pattison, R, Roberts, L and Pattison, N. *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (London: Mountain Press, 2012)
- Prynne, J. *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words: the William Matthews lectures 1992 delivered at Birkbeck College, London* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993)
- Love, T. "Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of JH Prynne" by NH Reeve and Richard Kerridge (United Kingdom, 2009)
<http://litrefsreviews.blogspot.com/2009/01/nearly-too-much-poetry-of-jh-prynne-by.html>
- Middleton, P. *Re: Question from a Reader Message to Ben Hall* (12/12/18) [Email]
- Khanna, S. *Flatness.eu* (United Kingdom, 2013) <http://flatness.eu/> [Accessed 9/12/18]
- *International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen 2013* (Germany, 2013)
<https://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/festival/looking-back/2013/festival-catalogue/> [Accessed 10/12/18]
- Khanna, S and Ward, D. *Flatness: an interview with Shama Khanna* (New York City, 2015) <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/21/flatness-interview-shama-khanna/> [Accessed 9/12/18]
- Khanna, S. *FLATNESS* (London, 2013)
<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/your-posts/flatness> [Accessed 8/12/18]
- Khanna, S and Atkins, E. *Ed Atkins: "Death Mask 2 & 3"* (2011)
<http://www.vdrome.org/ed-atkins-death-mask-2-3> [Accessed 6/12/18]
- Ferraro, J and Kalev, M. *James Ferraro: Bizarre rides to the far side* in *The Wire Issue 416* (United Kingdom, October 2018)
- Middleton, P. *Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground: Language in Contemporary UK Poetry* in Laing, A. and Nowell Smith, D. *Modernist Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015)
- *Rehana Zeman Speaking Nearby* (Glasgow: CCA, 10/2/18-25/3/18) [Exhibition]
- Latter, A. *Scheming for the possible world* (London, 2010)
<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2010/04/scheming-for-possible-world-j.html> [Accessed 8/12/18]
- Atkins, E and Bianconi, G. *Artist Profile: Ed Atkins* (New York City, 2013)
<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/jan/21/artist-profile-ed-atkins/> [Accessed 1/12/18]
- Rose, G. *Love's Work* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011)

- Hall, M. *On Violence in the Work of JH Prynne* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2015)
- Mellors, A. *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)
- Atkins, E. *Blind Faith, Artist Lecture by Ed Atkins* (Munich, Haus der Kunst, 4/5/18)
[Lecture] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8tb3KiEg5o&ab_channel=HausderKunst
[Accessed 1/12/18]