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From the Selected Works of Michael Theune

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Vita Nova by Louise Gluck

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Salt 11 (In the Mix: International Regionalism and Hypermodernism 1) edited by John Kinsella. Freemantle Arts Centre Press, \$16.95.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

In a recent interview (*Verse* 15.3/16.1), Australian poet John Kinsella defines his magazine and his relation to it, stating, “*Salt* is a field of potentials—in presentation, in meaning ... The editorial policy of *Salt* is eclectic ... What I am trying to do as editor is to create an interactive space—a gallery—in which text defines itself within a larger context. Experimental, or linguistically innovative, work plays against ‘traditional’ pieces ...”

Although *Salt* has long been a showcase for a variety of texts from a variety of aesthetics, this tendency is amplified in its most recent volume. Inherently pluralistic and multicultural—while *Salt* is an Australian magazine, this volume was edited from Cambridge, England—*Salt 11* is a massive text of 369 pages that includes work by almost 60 writers and an almost equivalent number of styles and concerns. Peter Porter’s pith, Dorothy Hewett’s plainspoken, sentimental poems, James Tate’s tragic wit, John Tranter’s critical lyrics, a poetic play, social drama, queer, performative fiction, interviews with writers Robert Adamson and Coral Hull and with editor Peter Forbes, and reviews of work on J.H. Prynne and by Louise Glück comprise a sample of the mix.

Although striving for eclecticism is a noble endeavor, it is one fraught with difficulty. Unguided, eclecticism quickly becomes either schizophrenia or assimilation. Because its main strategy for promoting eclecticism is simply to collect diverse works and put those works next to each other, *Salt* tends

toward assimilation. In *Salt*, there is little contest, little struggled-at differentiation, among the works, but perhaps there should be. In “Same As You,” James Tate writes, “As a former ranchero and postmodern / farmette I think we can speak freely / of the current crisis—the soil is creeping / out from under us and the haycocks / appear lubberly.” Though Coral Hull, an environmental activist poet, might agree with Tate’s notion that there is a crisis, she must have a problem with Tate’s presentation of that crisis as one more item in a list to be tweaked and tickled; however, this conversation is not emphasized as 250 pages separate the works of Tate and Hull. It is one thing to have many voices speak, but it is (an)other to present those voices as if they have something to say to one another.

It is also one thing to theorize about eclecticism, but it is another thing to activate it. While some essays in *Salt* get bogged down by what is now the very familiar difficulty of managing regionalism and internationalism, the hetero- and the homogenous—one concludes merely that “[t]here are no easy solutions” and that “awareness ... has to be the first step”—a further step is readily available: act. While the three interviews here are high-caliber, in each Kinsella is the interviewer. Why not have more interviewers, or else have the various interview participants interact with each other? Panels might create the space necessary for something odd, something new to come about. Additionally, though *Salt*’s reviews are very good, they deliver the expected; while the work around Prynne is highly theoretical, the work on Glück deciphers her treatment of myth. But why not strive to reverse this, encouraging absolute allusive clarity for Prynne scholarship and arguing that one cannot really understand Glück’s work without knowing Kristeva? Eclecticism is not natural; it is a difficult position that must be maintained, and diverse audiences must be convinced of or seduced—or tricked—into it.

Due to its problematic embodiment, it is tempting to desire *Salt* rid of its theoretical agenda; however, some very good writing is enlarged, strengthened by its theoretical context. Because of its inclusion in *Salt*, Andrew Burke’s poem, “Regional Aeolian,” not only challenges tradition’s spirit-lyre with “a stretch of / deserted powerlines” but also challenges a whole worldview still absurdly high on the idea of Progress. A section extracted from Cassandra Pybus’s memoir about growing up in Tasmania—which begins, “We all tell stories to give shape to our lives. In Tasmania we tell stories to reassure ourselves we have not slipped unnoticed over the rim of the world”—is shown to move nicely in the realms of both personal detail and worldly significance. Against a backdrop of numerous fractured, difficult, hypermodernist texts, the aphoristic end of the first of David Kennedy’s “Postmodern Scenes”—

“Now, who knows ... if play / is just play or powerlessness made sexy and sold back to us”—seems as deep as it is slick.

Though there is much to admire in *Salt 11*, what is admirable are authors’ playful, knowing, challenging works and, of course, Kinsella’s effort to bring those works together. However, as a “space,” *Salt* is too much just that, a repository for current writing. Instead of thinking of *Salt* in terms of that substance’s ability to preserve, Kinsella might consider more clearly that other saline ability, the ability to encourage a taste.