

Assemblage Poetics

Brian Ang

The 2008 economic crisis and global backdrop of struggles by 2011 renewed possibilities for thinking totality, materializing it for apprehension. I wrote *The Totality Cantos* from the desire to be interested in everything, sampling from discourses of history, philosophy, religion, science, and the humanities, knowledges of what constitute totality. Assemblage poetics, constructive verse, writing adequate to apprehending totality.

– Brian Ang, *The Totality Cantos* (Atelos, 2022), back cover description derived from 'Preface: Totality and Method'

Assemblage poetics is my response to my concern with totality. I first pointed to an assemblage poetics in *The Totality Cantos*. I want to account my thinking up to now in order to develop this poetics further.

Totality is the organisation of the whole. It is constituted by the multiplicities of its parts. Discourse is the apprehension in language of those multiplicities. It is the expression in language of the content of things.

Writing is articulation in an assemblage of discourses. A text may in turn be thought of as an assemblage. A text is constructed word by word. A text's becomings are determined by its words, overdetermined by its discourses. Changing a word changes a text.

Write to subjectivate sense, to shape readers' subjective sense, their possibilities for making meaning. Enjoin readers to assemble discourses dispersed in totality in order to make sense of writing.

Write a rhizome with the world. Adjust assemblages multiplying connections among parts.

Practical poetics. Consider how words affect each other, how they may increase possibilities for making sense.

Opposite: *It's not dementia it's your heart / 7 8 9 10*, 42 x 29.7 cm, multi-media collage, 2022, Michael Farrell, (photographed by Leah Muddle)



Totality's organizations of power define dominant forms of sense that constitute us as subjects. Assemble parts of totality against dominant forms toward counter-subjectivations. Encounters over recognitions.

Sample everything. Look for new weapons everywhere.

Connect with critical assemblages. Extend the rhizome in all directions.

Assemblage poetics is concerned with how words and things may connect, how assemblages and practices that articulate them may connect, a collective project for reassembling totality. The following are some practices that I see doing assemblage poetics. This poetics may be extended by those who find this useful.

Brian Ang, *The Totality Cantos* (Atelos, 2022)

Caleb Beckwith, *Political Subject* (Roof, 2018)

A.J. Carruthers, *AXIS Book 1: Areal* (Vagabond Press, 2014)

Tom Comitta, *The Nature Book* (Coffee House Press, forthcoming 2023)

alex cruse, *CONTRAVERSE* (Timeless, Infinite Light, 2017)

Paul Ebenkamp, *Late Hiss* (Desert Pavilion, 2021)

Angela Hume, *Interventions for Women* (Omnidawn, 2021)

Carrie Hunter, *Vibratory Milieu* (Nightboat Books, 2021)

Michael Leong, *Disorientations* (Forthcoming)

Divya Victor, *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021)

Brian Ang, *The Totality Cantos* (Atelos, 2022)

Writing is constructive articulation, articulating lines and assembling sections in order to subjectivate sense against totality's limiting of it, thinking extendable in all directions. Words draw attention, are considered for their meanings and the discourses they are parts of, and are connected by resonances and rhythms. Through disarticulating discourses and constructing assemblages, traces of discourses are preserved and new connections from different combinations are made possible, every word connectable with all others, projecting every discourse it is part of. Discursive fields overdetermine words and lines, sense extendable through all fields. Assemblage poetics, constructive verse, writing adequate to apprehending totality.

– Brian Ang, 'Preface: Totality and Method', *The Totality Cantos*

The Totality Cantos' first section:

Higher prewar purification deity crisscrossing behavior

Temple menhirs

All future apparent positivist interfaith nirvana protest promises

Professional defective ethical unholy jingle value guidebook hierarchy
churches

Immoral false performative subject process contact host

Extensive worship data nature dimensions

Intelligibility introduction evil

Music

Constant internal throat workers

Infinitely captioned opinion mistake transition childe eye gender choirmaster
fraud

totalitycantos.net includes a generator that randomises assemblages of its one thousand sections.

Caleb Beckwith, *Political Subject* (Roof, 2018)

Political Subject is a diagnostic of discourses in the political present, from culture to ideologies to struggles, that constitute us as subjects. Within our permanent crisis, it articulates hundreds of assemblages for constructive becoming, keeping open lines for thinking otherwise.

– Brian Ang, blurb for *Political Subject*

Caleb Beckwith on *Political Subject*:

Political Subject was written from January to December 2017, and it more or less documents my engagement with the political and emotional upheaval of that year ... The process of writing the disjunctive poems was usually as simple as recording 2–6 different pieces of language that struck me, and putting them in an order that worked for my ear. The title usually came after the fact and framed the poems in whatever political discourse seemed to me to be operating in the background of my consciousness that day.

Political Subject's first two poems:

ACCELERATIONIST RENAISSANCE

raw dog
 canon formation

anointed aphasic
 flat earth undercurrent

tortured sense
 correct and unconscionable

MUTUAL AID

on the hook
 confirmation bias

immaterial outdoor
 affection

by crook, please
 somebody

A.J. Carruthers, *AXIS Book 1: Areal* (Vagabond Press, 2014)

AXIS Book 1: Areal assembles areas from parts of the world for rhizomatic improvisation. It sets parts in interplay to write becomings toward other possible worlds.

A.J. Carruthers on *AXIS Book 1: Areal*:

A long poem. Book the first... Reinventing the serial poem ... 'New' Pragmatism. From the workshop of potential musico-poetics. Constructivist. Literatures of 'avant-pragmatism' (Joan Retallack) require realisms of linguistic and conceptual complexity. The strangest thing: I would like there to be a litany of errors here. A generalized clinamen? How to think pragmatically the long poem, its parameters, pitfalls, benefits, breaks, difficulties, setbacks, gaps, protracted temporalities, the impatience, the

laziness? At least now, this feels like the perfect place to begin. The poem is not, never pure ... *Axis. n.*, an imaginary line (score) around which bodies (neumes) rotate. *Areal. adj.*, of or pertaining to an area. To find an area to be writing in ... All kinds of language are of interest.

From 'Axis 3. "Axiom"':

Nature	Capital
liability	<i>in extremis</i>
divine audition	dies
and we	are left
with choros	multivoc
philosoph	pileup
quot (out)	in quot
queery	querulous
interesting	interlacer

the law of the people is unwritten, choral intersector enters the universe,

Tom Comitta, *The Nature Book* (Coffee House Press, Forthcoming 2023)

The Nature Book denaturalises the novel's contribution to the discursive construction of the idea of nature. Within our climate crisis that this idea contributed to, it reassembles nature descriptions articulated in novels toward a renegotiation of our relation to nature.

The Nature Book's description:

The Nature Book collages nature descriptions from 300 canonical novels into a single novel. With the environmental background brought to the fore, human characters and objects disappear, giving center stage to the animals, landscapes, and weather patterns that have buttressed human drama since the beginning of the novel form.

The 87,000-word book tells a continuous story but also acts as an archive of how authors perceive and distort nature, covering the gamut

of natural settings: all four seasons, oceans, islands, jungles, outer space, grasslands, mountain ranges, and deserts.

The Nature Book begins:

Since the beginning, time was a form of sustenance—pleasant as the spring, comfortable as the summer, fruitful as autumn, dreadful as winter. Weeks, months, seasons passed with dreamlike slowness, and the Earth moved in its diurnal course.

To a waiting horse perhaps time passed with torturous languor. To a tree this phenomenon was common enough; much more unusual was the fact that years passed, and by some accident another tree arrived, and flowers and birds and insects.

On earth time was marked by the sun and moon, by rotations that distinguished day from night. The present was a speck that kept blinking, brightening and diminishing, something neither alive nor dead. How long did it last? One second? Less? It was always in flux; in the time it took to consider it, it slipped away.

alex cruse, *CONTRAVERSE* (Timeless, Infinite Light, 2017)

CONTRAVERSE drifts through bodily and technological networks looking everywhere for weapons against control. Within control society, it assembles critical components for subjectivity for navigating these networks.

CONTRAVERSE's description:

Feminist data maps. Perverse technical networks. How do we navigate the vertigo between technology and our bodies? *CONTRAVERSE* is a guide and a counter-spell for the nexus of big business, big tech, and the state that situates our lives. Shimmering between cosmology and information overload, *CONTRAVERSE* asks that we re-map our relation to the grid and seize control of our cyborg bodies.

From *CONTRAVERSE*:

Wirelessly, mouths full

of entropy + drift;

confined mortals value the
Accidental. We bump

into a totality and excuse ourselves
politely as reflex

alloyed to disciplinary
habitat. like microns etched into
glass.

Paul Ebenkamp, *Late Hiss* (Desert Pavilion, 2021)

Late Hiss reassembles sense against dominant forms defined by organizations of power. Within the lateness of our era, it listens for and articulates emergent forms toward counter-subjectivations.

Late Hiss' description:

Late Hiss is a suite of five formally distinct poems written by a voice that isn't sure what exactly it has seen but sure as hell knows it's seen it, after which it seems like it never stops hearing itself for the first time, looking around itself in sovereign gratitude and awe, resolutely only half-remembering what speaking is supposed to do. (Concise in its limitlessness, half-remembering is everything; the present is the most ancient thing there is.)

From 'Peace':

(continuity error)
how to live

what to do
bleed it back

foreground dark
a window's defense

the mirror in knots
same difference

too much to remember
too much to forget

Angela Hume, *Interventions for Women* (Omnidawn, 2021)

Interventions for Women traverses intersecting multiplicities of exploitation and oppression, constructing connections among them to reassemble sense. It questions our subjectivations by organizations of power toward counter-subjectivations and how the world could be organized otherwise.

Angela Hume on the title poem:

I wanted to write a poem about how the industrial food system alienates feminized people from their bodies, and how this alienation requires, colludes with, and exacerbates economic and racial oppressions along

with the exploitation of animals. And about how the industrialization of agriculture has been more or less coextensive with the development of modern institutions and technologies for the surveillance and control of the intimate body activities (eating, fucking, reproducing) of women and girls.

While 'interventions for women' addresses global food systems and hunger, along with state and NGO approaches to naming systemic failures, its focus is on settler food production and eating in the United States. There is much more to be said about the violence of the food system internationally, not to mention everything else.

From 'interventions for women':

i started eating because of a
thermal cue

developed feeding behaviors
in the early hours

learned commodity junk-food
inputs like corn

glucose processed into fructose
crystalline ground highly pure

in digestion absorbed
directly into the blood

the cult of the nutrient
the cultural carb

monocropped across the tract
of our collective body

golden era of bad food science
and good food capitalism

that was the 1980s

overproduction of the appetitive
my body no different

from the market incentive
a bulk to be sweetened

a monosaccharide sink

Carrie Hunter, *Vibratory Milieu* (Nightboat Books, 2021)

Vibratory Milieu draws from a multitude of multiplicities to write a vibratory rhizome with the world. It sets parts of multiplicities in continuous variation constructing becomings between multiplicities within the organization of the world.

Carrie Hunter on *Vibratory Milieu*:

This manuscript has been a long writing project of maximalist fragmentation; 8 years of writing, collecting, and collaging bits from many different sources, procedures, and projects including: current events/news items, lines from my personal journal, from facebook/twitter quips, lines from films and my responses, poems written to music, poems sourced from dreams, writing poetry responding to friends' poems, bits from the first section of a planned trilogy poem responding to the *Divine Comedy*, lines written after meditating, responses to poetry, spiritual texts, and theory in my feminist theory reading group.

From 'Lusimeles':

The floor is on the walls.

Walls of Death's have died out.

Things that the sun does not look upon.

ESTIVATION.

Dreams a sort of reality that
actual reality is in conflict with.

It's hard to understand something that doesn't make sense.

Against gravity's wishes.

An unbroken line of police violence.

The future may not be so rosy.

NEXT RHIZOMATIC EXIT.

When you look at stars, you're looking at the past.

A spilled box
of store-bought seashells
on the street.

Michael Leong, *Disorientations* (Forthcoming)

Disorientations disorients Orientalist discourse's production of colonised subjectivity. It reassembles this discourse's articulations to subvert colonial subjectivation toward counter-subjectivations.

Michael Leong on *Disorientations*:

Disorientations, my long poem in progress, collages together and so 'disorients' two postmodern Orientalist texts: Kent Johnson's *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* and Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*... My hope is that collaging Barthes' and Johnson's texts together, using their language as a basis for re-articulation, will act as an immanent critique, a reckoning of these two works quite literally on, and with, their own terms... I have described my technique as 'micro-mashup' or 'micro-montage,' a practice that engages and intervenes within found text at a very fine level of granularity: in essence, I extract

individual words and phrases from the two source texts and slowly accrete them into an assemblage of verbal tesserae.

From *Disorientations*:

Our best judgement is always ideological—it is born only to withdraw into the spiral of a lacerated name. But, in the interests of the long, undated renga unknown to us, we must tally down the layered encounters, the conscripted collaborators from that invented fissure between Orient and Occident. That is where Araki is gazing out through the vast centuries of imperial radiation. That is where he photographed the atomic flower arrangements of the void and contrasted—historically, philosophically, and culturally—insertions of desirable darkness with an occultation of light.

In 1980, Araki died instantly in the blast of our narcissism, flashes of which are still sporadically cooking the thread of our capitalist acculturation. In the poet's way, he perished from a sickness found only in discourse itself; yet, in a carbon dated mutation of *after*, the fantasy of his death survived.

Divya Victor, *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021)

Curb engages events of racial conflict in the United States to reassemble sense in the discursive struggle for cultural memory. It questions their contexts within organisations of power toward how the world could be organised otherwise.

Curb's description:

Curb maps our post-9/11 political landscape by locating the wounds of domestic terrorism at unacknowledged sites of racial and religious conflict across cities and suburbs of the United States.

Divya Victor documents how immigrants and Americans navigate the liminal sites of everyday living: lawns, curbs, and sidewalks undergirded by violence but also constantly repaved with new possibilities of belonging. *Curb* witnesses immigrant survival, familial bonds, and interracial parenting in the context of nationalist and white-supremacist violence against South Asians. The book refutes the binary of the model minority and the monstrous, dark 'other' by reclaiming the throbbing, many-tongued, vermilion heart of kith.

From 'Blood / Soil':

I slouch to the writing sideways
 crab limbs cling to the torso in tumult
 where my elbows bowl in, my knees keel
 to my feet scraping off the carpet, frothing a writing body to the desk.
 My reluctance is quicksand; this lyric lead. I can't know how
 each fist knots, each knuckle locks

his legs refuse gravity, legs coil on pavement
 his torso goes limp, knees quiet
 away from the dash-cam

his head—its dread stillness

I said ਮੇਂ ਕੜ੍ਹੁ.
 I said ਮੇਂ ਕੜ੍ਹੁ.

"No English. Indian. Walking"

"My handkerchief fell.

I was brought down on the grass"