

# **Aesthetics of Concern: Art in the Wake of the Triple Disaster of North-Eastern Japan and Hurricane Katrina**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011, several artists turned their practices towards the subject of disaster support. Drawing on the philosophy of Bruno Latour, I argue that these artistic practices come to articulate and re-present the multitude of concerns interwoven with disaster.

**KEYWORDS:** Disaster art; Bruno Latour; Actor-Network Theory; matters-of-concern

## **Introduction: Art in the Wake of Disaster**

On 11 March 2011, a massive earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale struck off the coast of north-eastern Japan, near the area known as Tohoku. The resulting catastrophe has since been dubbed the ‘Triple Disaster of 3.11,’ in reference to the simultaneity of three disastrous events. First, the term refers to the earthquake itself, which—although of extreme magnitude—in fact caused comparatively little damage, owing to the incredible feats of Japanese engineering in the context of quake-proofing buildings. Second, because the epicentre of the earthquake was undersea, following the tremor a series of large tsunamis hit the coast of Tohoku, inundating towns and rural regions along this 500-kilometer-long coastal line. According to official estimates from August 2011, the toll of casualties from the earthquake and tsunami included 15,760 people who had been killed; 5,927 who had been injured; and 4,282 who were still missing. Furthermore, 120,000 buildings had been destroyed and 220,000 damaged, leaving 580,000 people displaced from their homes (Kingston, *Introduction* 1). Third, the tsunami also hit the coast-based nuclear power plant called Fukushima Daiichi, triggering a terrifying nuclear crisis (Asahi Shimbun, 12 March 2011). The impact of the tsunami caused a meltdown at the plant, extensive radioactive contamination, and, in the end, a nuclear crisis comparable in scale only to that of Chernobyl in 1986. Ultimately, 80,000 people had to be evacuated from within a radius of 20 kilometers from the power plant (Kingston, *Introduction* 1).

In the wake of such disasters, myriads of diverse actors are mobilized into action. Governments, institutions, NGOs, volunteers, and various forms of civilian action efforts, both national and transnational, are called on to do something to provide relief for those immediately affected. Among these actors are also some from the cultural arena, including

artists. This essay will consider how artists respond to the situations brought forth by disasters by redirecting their artistic activities towards disaster support. I will suggest that an analytical focus on ‘concern’ allows for an understanding of a specific aesthetic awareness that, I will argue, is at work in such disaster-driven artistic practices.

This will be done based on research on the mobilization of contemporary art practices in Japan after the triple disaster of 3.11. This research has shown that a large field of art professionals were, and still are, very engaged in disaster support, and that the type of support coming from this field, more often than not, has taken on a hybrid character criss-crossing the spheres of art, activism, and disaster relief (Thorsen). These activities include artists who have visualized the reach and power of the tsunami by documenting the enormous objects it destroyed and threw around like toys (Takashi Murakami), or who made the omnipresent radioactive contamination tangible by letting a Geiger counter produce a sound every time it detected radiation (Fuyuki Yamakawa) (*Artists and the Disaster*). I will focus on one particular art project called the Repairing Earthquake Project by artist Nishiko, which will serve as an example of artist’s engagement in disaster support. Repairing Earthquake Project is an extensive and continually evolving project in which artist Nishiko has developed an aim of collecting, repairing and documenting destroyed objects from the disaster areas by engaging with local people in Tohoku and letting them guide her in this process. It consists of different phases (three so far) which are developed continuously as the aftermath of 3.11 unfolds: a first one where she researched and collected broken things, like vases and plates; a second where she set up workshops and repaired these things and recently a third, where she has tracked, documented and collected debris washed to sea by the tsunami.

Based on this art project I will argue that a particular form of aesthetic sensibility is at work in art practices brought forth by disaster, one that is based on a receptiveness towards the multiplicity of concerns that are inevitably woven into disasters. Building on this analysis I will then shift the perspective to hurricane Katrina, which hit the United States in 2005, and the art project Floodwall by artist Jana Napoli. For this project Napoli has collected 710 drawers that she found in the ruined landscape left behind by the hurricane, and has exhibited these drawers on a large wall. By comparing the two disasters and the art projects by Napoli and Nishiko I want to make the case for two interconnected points. First, that

disasters, as phenomena and across time and space, can be understood as a kind of knot where ‘domains’—like public, private, art, science, politics, ecology, etc.—that are often regarded as ontologically separate clearly intertwine under the common denominator of shared concerns. One might well argue that disasters are fundamentally cross-disciplinary and, indeed, ‘cross-ontological’ events, in that they hurl together all kinds of entities which ruthlessly co-implicate and affect each other. This basic condition is also of key importance when looking into the artistic activities mobilized by such disasters, which is why the second point is that such activities emerging from disasters cannot and should not be detached from the circumstances, the actors, the issues, and the concerns according to which they were conceived and shaped. Artistic practices brought into being by disasters—whether in the United States or in Japan—are triggered, conceived, shaped and inextricably interwoven with the disaster as such, and thus all equally concerned actors.

Following this, I will instead suggest that the work by French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour can be useful as a theoretical framework that allows for such artistic activities to be analyzed as hybrid formations prompted by concern.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the Repairing Earthquake Project by Nishiko, I will first use Latour’s philosophy, and more precisely Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the notion of ‘*amodernity*,’ as a general theoretical basis for engaging with hybrid formations. Second, I will pay particular attention to his concept of ‘*matters-of-concern*,’ with which he suggests that what ties us together the strongest as humans are the ‘*things*’ we share, that is, the matters and the issues that concern us collectively. Starting from Latour’s philosophy, I will suggest that such art projects are simultaneously *motivated* by the shared matters-of-concern of the disaster; and, as they gradually come to successively represent and give cultural form to these matters-of-concern, thereby also *perform* what I will call an ‘*aesthetics of matters-of-concern*.’ I will briefly introduce this philosophical framework in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, and especially since the early 1990s, several important art theoretical contributions have been made in an effort to untangle, describe and analyze what is at stake when artworks are not ‘self-contained’ but rather become artworks qua their relations to and dependence on some social or political context. Due to the proportions of this essay I will not be paying attention to these contributions here. However, I have dealt with this and discussed the work of Latour against that of e.g. Suzanne Lacy and Miwon Kwon in an art critical perspective elsewhere (Thorsen).

## A Theory of Amodernity

Latour's philosophical work can be seen as an overall reckoning with the idea of 'modernity' and all that this category implies.<sup>2</sup> He aims at a radical break with the very notion of modernity—and thus also the notions of pre-modernity and post-modernity—as he believes that these concepts fundamentally rest on fictitious premises, namely the assumption that reality can be divided into two distinct ontological spheres: Culture and Nature.<sup>3</sup> Latour calls this division 'the modern constitution' and argues that modern ontology has opened a doorway for a radical separation between Nature, science and facts on the one side, and Culture, society and subjects on the other. The problem, according to Latour, is that the premise for understanding things in a modern regime is fundamentally deceptive because natural as well as cultural phenomena are not divided. Phenomena that are separated into distinct domains for the 'pure' sciences always refer to multiple realities and are themselves both natural, cultural, social and discursive—they are hybrid. Phenomena simply do not act according to the modern constitution (cf. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern 2*).

To overcome this problem of modernity, Latour invites us to join in an ontological experiment, where he demands a turn from the modern ontology that 'purifies' towards an ontology that 'hybridizes' and is fundamentally amodern (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 12). This is in many ways the task that Latour (along with several of his colleagues) has undertaken with the formulation of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the theoretical figures it offers for overcoming such divisions.

Following his critique of the modern constitution—and the analysis that all phenomena are fundamentally hybrid—the defining feature of 'actors' in the context of ANT is that they can be, and are, all kinds of entities that assume some kind of role in the unfolding of events as they partake in relations with other heterogeneous actors. Furthermore, an actor can and will move unproblematically across cultural, social, natural,

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of this essay, Latour's notion of modernity should not be confused with the art-historical category of modernism.

<sup>3</sup> In the book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour traces the origins of modernity partly to the historical and philosophical development of humanism as the 'birth of man' and partly to the age of enlightenment and the constitution of the natural and social sciences as two distinct domains of knowledge as developed by, respectively, Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes (cf. Latour *We Have Never Been Modern* 16).

and political spheres and engage with all kinds of other actors that will not behave according to the prescriptions of the modern constitution either. In this sense, the actor is itself constitutively hybrid, and in order to “[...]follow the actors themselves [...]” (a typical credo of ANT) (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 12), you should not confine research to only one domain of reality. I want to underscore that this does not mean that Latour vouches for some kind of perspectivism or relativism or indeed believes in what his colleague Donna Haraway terms as “[...] the god tricks [...]” (189) of unmediated access to a view from nowhere. It simply means that we should pay close and serious attention to the phenomenon that we study and the actors that it mobilizes, and follow them through all the links of relations that they engage in, be they cultural, social, natural, or political. These ‘links of relations’ are the ‘network’ of Actor-Network Theory, a dynamic set of interconnections between the actors always in the process of engaging in new connections depending on the actions of these actors. As such, Latour’s notion of a network is far from a stable set of structures but can perhaps be understood in terms of an organism that is always moving, multiplying, and branching out (cf. Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 128-33).<sup>4</sup>

### Matters-of-Concern

The concept of matters-of-concern is one that Latour gradually develops through a number of different texts, always in close relation to his other theoretical notions such as ANT. When defining matters-of-concern, Latour often takes as a point of departure a more generic critique of political philosophy and indeed his ‘critique of critique.’<sup>5</sup> To a large extent, he also engages with art and art history (along with science and religion) as a partner for the development of his own political philosophy and the continuous formulation of the concept of matters-of-concern. However, I do not wish to claim that Latour is attempting to formulate an aesthetic theory that could then be adopted in a one-to-one relation. Rather, I am convinced that Latour engages with aesthetics and artistic practices insofar as they serve

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<sup>4</sup> Latour is openly inspired by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, which is especially evident regarding the notion of networks given that their capillary movements in many ways resemble the wild shoots of the rhizome.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the text “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” from 2004.

as tools for developing aspects of his own political philosophy and his notion of ‘dingpolitik,’ which I will return to. In my reading, Latour sees art as one set of practices and one particular vantage point, amongst several others, from which he can approach a range of ‘thing-political’ subjects—that is, the ‘things’ that concern us. The development of the concept of matters-of-concern, in turn, provides an important stepping-stone for an aesthetic analysis that is able to embrace and add fresh insights into art practices engaged with public concerns.

In *The Spinoza Lectures* published under the headline ‘*What is the Style of Matters of Concern*’ in 2008, Latour zeroes in on matters-of-concern, and he approaches what would be an ‘aesthetics of matters-of-concern,’ an open-ended project in which Latour claims to have taken only a few initial steps (46-47). Matters-of-concern are to be seen as an antithesis to its much more famous sister, matters-of-fact, which adheres to the modern constitution. As such, matters-of-concern can be seen as one of the conceptual markers for designating the route that Latour suggests for an *amodern* ontology. Where matters-of-fact are indisputable because ‘facts are facts,’ matters-of-concern exist only because they ‘matter,’ and they matter precisely because they are mobilized via actors willing to argue and dispute because of their attachments to their matters-of-concern. They are the ‘things,’ the matters, the issues, the affairs around which affected publics gather because the disputability mobilizes publics that are willing to argue because of them and thereby placing the matters within a democratic arena (cf. Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern* 46-49). As Latour writes in *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public*, “[we] might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matters of concern, the issues we care for, than by any other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles” (4). In this way, matters-of-concern is a political concept that points towards a democratic process that allows the ‘things’ that matter to the public to be made political (cf. Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 4-31). However, Latour is keen to stress that in order to make matters-of-concern political and durably disputable—that is, democratic—we also need visual and aesthetic strategies that are able to *re-present* them successively.

Following Latour’s critique of matters-of-fact, he finds it important to question the modern idea of what it means to represent and does not actually vouch for any one existing theory of representation. However, he uses this more familiar and generic concept to sketch

the relevant context, and from this known territory he moves towards a reformulation that he finds more acceptable. Latour argues that the mainstream (modern) understanding of what representation means would have ‘us’ believe—insofar as we believe in the rational sciences—that to represent connotes a one-to-one relationship between the represented and the representation. This is what he calls the aesthetics of matters-of-fact. But this notion of representation is, of course, a modern one that goes hand in hand with the belief that ‘facts are facts and therefore indisputable.’ If we are to move away from the doctrines of modernity, then it is not possible to hold on to an understanding of representation that does not account for the *re*-presentation—the translation and the mediation—that is always at work when something is repositioned from one sphere to another. So Latour vouches for a redefinition of representation that clearly points out that representations always involves *re*-presenting, that is, *re*-positioning. *Re*-presentation then means that matters are always mediated, always translated, always carried by argumentations for one’s assertions, and supported by actors in multiple forms (cf. Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 16). In Latour’s philosophy, mediation is then never an evil but a condition of any meaningful communication, any participation, and any political action.

The concept of matters-of-concern is developed in close association to Latour’s other theoretical concepts. In the aforementioned text *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik*, the designation of matters-of-concern is encompassed in connection to what Latour calls ‘dingpolitik,’ which is a reformulation of the mainstream concept of ‘realpolitik.’ Realpolitik is also a concept that Latour sees as closely tied to modernity as it refers to a “matter-of-fact way of dealing with naked power relations” (*From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 4). As matters-of-fact have been unfairly tied to the ‘objects’ they are to represent, this has given us the false impression that objects can be represented unproblematically—that is, objectively. But as ANT has never tired of showing, objects are far more than just the proverbial ‘things-in-themselves.’ So instead of settling for a misused notion of objectivity, Latour proposes that we try to shift our focus to ‘things’ and hence to a ‘dingpolitik’ rather than the objects of a realpolitik (Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 12). The ding or ‘thing’ of dingpolitik is founded in the etymology of the word ‘ting’/‘ding’ still used in Nordic and Saxon nations in words for places where ‘the people,’ or rather the representatives of the people, assemble. Etymologically and politically “[...] the *Ding* or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue

that brings people together *because* it divides them” (Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 13). Things that matter gather publics and make people (and non-humans) assemble and mobilize actions in different ways, coherent with their matters-of-concern.

In sum, ‘things’ are not bestowed with the indisputability of the factual matters of realpolitik, which is why dingpolitik revolves around the matters that concern us. These matters-of-concern need to be *re-presented* in order to *re-present* the people and make the aspiration of a representational democracy possible somehow. This is why Latour asks the question “Can we devise an aesthetic of matters-of-concern, of Things?” (*From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* 13). However, as mentioned, an actual determination of what an aesthetic of matters-of-concern could be has not yet been formulated, and it is still a question that is largely unanswered. Latour circles around it on many occasions, and while he does get closer to answering this question, his engagement with aesthetics and aesthetic practices still seems to be aimed at the ‘political’ more than the ‘aesthetic’ possibilities of his theoretical work.

However, I will suggest that art projects brought into being as a response to situations such as 3.11 and Katrina can be taken as performing exactly an aesthetics of matters-of-concerns. In the following I will be turning my attention to Nishiko’s Repairing Earthquake Project as an example of a disaster-driven art project. I will argue that, by simultaneously being effectuated by the shared sudden concerns, and thereby also continuously re-presenting, mediating, and translating these concerns through aesthetic activities and in close collaboration and interdependence with other concerned actors, disaster-driven art practices may be fruitfully analyzed as doing an aesthetics of matter-of-concern.

### **Repairing Earthquake Project**

Nishiko is of Japanese descent but has lived in the Netherlands for the past seven years. She is not from the affected areas of Tohoku, and she was not in the country when the disaster struck. In a conversation I had with her, she emphasized this as both a problem and a motivation for her ongoing work with the disaster. She sees it as a problem in the sense that she has felt, and in a way still feels, very detached from the area and the people she is concerned about (Nishiko, *Interview*). This sense of detachment seems to have inspired a



specific approach to her work concerning the disaster. While still in the Netherlands, Nishiko decided to rethink her artistic practice so that she could use it for support actions regarding 3.11; because of her feeling of being too far removed from her matters-of-concern, she decided to go to Japan and to Tohoku. However, she thought that the disaster was well beyond what she could comprehend on her own, and she felt that it would be reckless to think that she could just march in and help however she saw fit. As she writes in a book on the first phase of the Repairing Earthquake Project, her efforts to help through her art project were dependent on “[...] communication with the local people of the area” (Nishiko, *Repairing Earthquake Project* 176). It is at this point that the ‘problem’ of her feeling of detachment seems to have turned into an ongoing motivation, resulting in a thorough investigative method for approaching her art project. Thus the disaster and the specific people and areas that Nishiko has engaged with throughout the past two and a half years have informed her Repairing Earthquake Project in constitutive ways.

Once in Japan, Nishiko met with a friend from Tohoku who was able to guide her in the process of appropriating her artistic practice for disaster support. With help from this friend she conducted what she describes as the first phase of the Repairing Earthquake Project from September to November 2011, primarily consisting of comprehensive research undertaken in the disaster-stricken areas (Nishiko, *nishiko55.com*). To begin with, Nishiko established contact with a volunteer house in order to start getting a stronger sense of the realities of the destruction and of how she could mobilize her capabilities as an artist towards helping in the right way (Nishiko, *Interview*). She later went to the town of Higashimatsushima, located on the coast, marking her first visit to a tsunami-destroyed town.<sup>6</sup> In my conversation with her, she recounts an episode from there that made a strong impression on her:

I went to an area in Higashimatsushima and started to walk around in the debris from the tsunami. I met a man there who was just walking around. He didn’t know what to do, he told me he didn’t have anything to do anymore. He lost everything, he lost his wife, his home, and his mother was still missing. He told me that right after the disaster he was so busy, and it was more ok when he was busy, but now he didn’t know what to do. (Nishiko, *Interview*)

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<sup>6</sup> 63% of the town Higashimatsushima was flooded by the tsunami on 11 March 2011.

Nishiko goes on to explain that at the time she met this man, he had decided to look for some personal documents in the debris; of course, she adds, they would be impossible for him to find. Thus, the activity of looking for pieces of paper in the endless amounts of rubble seems to have been intended more to keep busy than to search for the lost objects with the expectation of finding them. Nonetheless, in this situation, Nishiko helped the man look and talked to him; while doing this, she learned, among other things, why he was out there “keeping busy” (Nishiko, *Interview*). Subsequently, Nishiko went to the city of Watari, where she stayed with a woman and her family in their temporary housing. While there, Nishiko learned about the experiences of the family and accompanied them to the destroyed areas, and they, in turn, helped her come to terms with how she should relate to what she saw (Nishiko, *Repairing Earthquake Project* 176-188).

Nishiko has many such stories of talking to, helping, and being helped by people she encountered while researching; it was through this geographical, human, and material interaction that the Repairing Earthquake Project took its shape. Nishiko’s initial immersion into volunteer work and her close affiliation with affected people can be seen as more ‘conventional’ support activities, undertaken in an artist’s capacity. Nishiko explains that through experiencing the devastated areas and communicating with the local people, she gradually took it upon herself to start repairing the broken artefacts she found. Her aim in what became the Repairing Earthquake Project is to repair things so that they resemble, as much as possible, the state she imagines they were in before the tsunami (Nishiko, *nishiko55.com*).

Throughout this first phase, she researched and collected broken items. For the second phase, she has since set up workshops at various exhibition venues and worked on repairing the things she found as visitors observed the process, participated and talked to her about her experiences, their own experiences, and the project. In this way, the Repairing Earthquake Project operates via the embodied involvement Nishiko has with the people she encounters. This is true in the process of researching and finding the objects, in her going to the affected areas, talking to and living with affected people, and calling on their aid in giving shape to her art project. But encounters also occur through the subsequent acts of repairing as Nishiko activates memories and dialogues by engaging people in the workshops. Thus, the act of repairing comes to seem secondary to the effects that such broken objects may

produce in her and in the public engaged. Via her interaction with people and places, she aims at igniting a kind of collective processing by addressing the many memories woven into the 3.11 disaster.

Nishiko has simultaneously developed and maintained a project website ([nishiko55.com/eq/wordpress](http://nishiko55.com/eq/wordpress)) from the time she began the Repairing Earthquake Project in 2011. This website has come to be a crucial part of the overall project in that it ties the different phases together: as such, the website serves as a kind of meta-narrative to the overall project. Here, she documents the ongoing process and, in doing so, uses the website almost like a diary of her incessant research. At the same time, the website contains detailed information and visualisations of the disaster, shown through numbers and figures and several videos documenting the quake, the tsunami, and the landscape afterwards.

As time passed, Nishiko has expanded her repairing practices to the issues as they unfold; as the tons of debris washed to sea by the tsunami started appearing on shores across the globe, she began tracking it, collecting it, repairing and exhibiting it. This is the third and latest phase of the project, which she calls Repairing Debris (Nishiko, *nishiko55.com*). However, as in the other phases, the objects themselves are neither the only nor the primary aim of her efforts. In documenting and repairing the debris, Nishiko has again used her website to explain everything from sea currents and the places the debris expectedly will end up, to how the Japanese government is responding to and handling the massive amounts of debris on a national and transnational scale. One can speculate that the debris she is collecting is not necessarily from the 3.11 disaster—how would she (or anyone else) know?—but in researching the migration of debris, Nishiko is drawing attention to the fact that, whether we like it or not, we live amidst global connections: a disaster in one end of the world means tons of debris washing up on shore at the other end. Moreover, in a more sombre perspective, the migrations of physically tangible debris from Tohoku turning up on e.g. the Californian shores quickly starts pointing towards the much more ominous but invisible movements of radioactive contamination, also spreading rapidly from the Fukushima power plant and into the Pacific Ocean, perhaps following the same currents as the debris. As of 25 September 2013, the Japanese government and TEPCO—the company responsible for the Fukushima nuclear power plant—reported that at least 300 tons of contaminated water have leaked into the ocean (*Asahi Shimbun, 3/11 Disaster*).

In short, Nishiko has used her art practices to continuously articulate some of the many issues and concerns prompted by the disaster. This happens both on a very personal level, by talking to and involving local Tohoku people and visitors to her workshops, and by her collecting, repairing, and exhibiting the things of the disaster, thereby directing attention to those who have lost everything. But it also happens on a larger scale when using her website to document all kinds of information on the disaster, including the national and transnational politics of how to handle its various aspects and issues. Thus, by documenting, reporting, visualising, and mapping the things of the disaster, she calls attention to some of the serious effects provoked by the 3.11 disaster.

### Aesthetics of Matters-of-Concern

Looking at Repairing Earthquake Project by Nishiko through Latour's concepts, they take on a kind of double role and significance. First, by engaging with disaster support in the way that she does, conceiving and shaping her activities according to the phenomenon and the actors woven into it, Nishiko may be said to proceed through a kind of 'method' that resonates with ANT and the notion of *amodernity*. Second, and related, by following this distinctive approach, the art project come to articulate, mediate, and re-present a range of what Latour calls matters-of-concern manifest in Tohoku and Japan after the disaster. In the following I will deal with these two interrelated strands of reasoning in turn.

To put the first strand about 'methods' succinctly, Latour's philosophy may elucidate the art project by Nishiko given that she has approached her artistic activities by engaging with various actors, human and non-human, and has sought to let these multiple actors and their concerns speak simultaneously and equally through the art project. One point of departure for identifying the way she has done this is to note Nishiko's preliminary efforts to engage, in a more 'conventional' fashion, in volunteer activities. Thousands of people volunteered to help in the disaster zones, and all mobilized their abilities and modes of expertises in different ways in the effort to help. I believe the same is the case regarding most of the artists involved in disaster aid, including Nishiko.

Her project started on the basis of communication with local Tohoku people and her desire to learn how she might help them. The act of repairing is not something Nishiko had done previously in her artistic practice; however, tracing, documenting, and collecting things

is something she had been doing for several years before 3.11. So her effort to also trace, document, and collect the ‘things’ of the disaster can be seen as an extension and reformulation of her art practice within the context of 3.11 (Nishiko, nishiko55.com).

This reformulation, importantly, is to allow her practice and the project to be shaped by the specific situation and the people and things she encounters while researching and developing it. As such, the Repairing Earthquake Project is the result of interplay between Nishiko and the various actors she has engaged with throughout the project, not least in terms of the people she has met with and who have in many ways been the guiding forces in her project. As an effect of Nishiko’s feeling of being detached from Japan and Tohoku, others—her friend, the man she met in Higashimatsushima and the family she stayed with in Watari—have played key roles in determining the path that Repairing Earthquake Project has taken. Indeed, in the beginning of her book on the project, 36 persons are listed as contributors (Nishiko 10). However, material and other non-human actors have also played central parts in this development. From the very act of collecting the broken objects of the disaster, Nishiko takes the potential stories held by these ‘things’ very seriously. Throughout the workshops, these objects have been the essential entry points for the way repair activities would take shape, the conversations she has engaged in, the memories and experiences thereby triggered, and so on. All these heterogeneous actors have been allowed to guide, perhaps even to lead her art project. Nishiko’s approach, or ‘method,’ for engaging in disaster support, we might say, has been to ‘follow the actors’ (the credo of ANT). Nishiko has partaken in and created a vast (and indeed, *a*modern) 3.11-related actor-network herself, which she has meticulously traced, collected, and documented as part of her artistic practice. Following Latour, this artistic approach may be said to underscore his claim that ‘things’—the disaster, the art projects and the issues they deal with—are not modern.

Carried out via such an ‘associational’ approach, the art project comes to articulate, mediate, and re-present the issues and concerns that are woven into the very phenomena that informed it. Put differently, the art project comes to re-present the matters-of-concern; as such, it may be viewed as ‘doing’ what Latour has indicated as an aesthetics of matters-of-concern (*What is the Style of Matters of Concern* 29-50). To return to what I stated in the beginning of this section about the double role and significance of the art project: when approached from the perspective of Latourian philosophy, we note how, via a particular

approach (the first role) the art projects serve to articulate, mediate, and re-present a range of disaster-related matters-of-concern (the second role).

This point can be seen quite concretely in the case of the man Nishiko met in Higashimatsushima: the entire act of Nishiko helping him look for documents in the debris is both a part of her art project—indeed, this encounter has been crucial to her further process—but also completely co-determined by the specific situation and immediate concerns of this man, trying to ‘keep busy’ because the disaster had turned his world upside-down. This man’s desperate will to keep himself busy is arguably mirrored in Nishiko’s own restlessness and will to do *something* in the wake of 3.11. In her act of helping him, their concerns in a sense fuse. And although their matters-of-concern are effected by dissimilar situations, this common concern comes to shape Nishiko’s art project as she uses her practice to help in whatever way possible.

Moreover, in the actual repairing workshops also set up by Nishiko, the things she has collected point beyond the objects as such and to the stories that they bear witness to, the encounters they co-create, and the concerns they embody and are attached to. Nishiko, the objects, her act of repairing them, and the various people involved in the process collectively create a setting for discussing the concerns embodied in and attached to the broken things. The things act as re-presentations of various matters-of-concern that Nishiko and the visitors are able to ‘tap into’ via the broken objects and her art project, and can therefore be said to perform an aesthetics of matters-of-concern.

### **Hurricane Katrina: Floodwall**

Six years earlier and on the other side of the world, the United States were struck by an equally devastating event of historical proportions, when the hurricane known as Katrina swept across the south-eastern states on 29 August 2005. With wind speeds up to 281 km per hour Katrina amounted to a category five hurricane<sup>7</sup> as it went over New Orleans, Louisiana. It has since been evaluated as the most overall destructive hurricane in the history of the United States (Marshall and Picou 2). This is considering both the destruction caused

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<sup>7</sup> On the Saffir-Simpson Wind Scale a category five hurricane is the highest classification a hurricane can reach.

by the hurricane in itself, but also the many disastrous events that unfolded in the wake of Katrina. While the power of the winds were certainly devastating by themselves, many argue that it was the impact of the forces of nature on vulnerable technological systems that triggered the most devastating and uncontrollable situations (Marshall and Picou 2-3; Tuana 198-203). If the hurricane in itself is regarded as the first factor of the overall disastrous phenomenon of 'Katrina,' the second and third factor took shape exactly in the hurricane's collision with the technological systems. Because of the massive flood caused by the hurricane, the levees that were designed to control just such a situation breached, and 80 percent of the city was flooded (Marshall and Picou 2). Third, and also a result of technological impact, Katrina triggered multiple contamination events. As Nancy Tuana writes in the text *Vicious Porosity: Witnessing Katrina*, New Orleans has several toxic waste sites that have been classified as superfund sites,<sup>8</sup> five of which were compromised by the flooding (198). Though not officially confirmed, many claim to have proven that a wide range of toxic pollutants seeped out with the floodwaters, amounting to a "toxic soup" running through New Orleans (Tuana 198). Furthermore, according to Brent K. Marshall and Steven Picou, it has been documented that Katrina caused at least ten major oil spills that released around eight million gallons of oil into the environment, in addition to all the minor oil spills resulting from the devastation of private homes and establishments (6). Taken together, what I here refer to as the 'three factors' of the disaster, Katrina becomes a complex event where the hurricane seems to be only one actor in a chain of multiple and co-produced disastrous events. Katrina has been estimated to have claimed the lives of over 1800 people, and between 700.000 and 1.2 million people were displaced from their homes as a result of the calamities, causing the largest forced migration in the United States since the 1930s (Marshall et al. 2).

Much like 3.11, Katrina can be seen as manifold and as a complex disaster that benefits from an analysis that is capable of taking it's many aspects serious as such. Though situated differently in time and space and within very different material and socio-political contexts, 3.11 and Katrina in fact share characteristics on some very central points. In the

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<sup>8</sup> Superfund is the federal government's program to clean up uncontrolled hazardous waste sites. Such hazardous waste sites are referred to as 'superfund sites'. See also: <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/>

following I will first briefly turn my attention towards the art project Floodwall by Jana Napoli, and through this, in comparison with Repairing Earthquake Project, I will argue that disasters function as knots or meetings points for actors, human and non-human, and their shared concerns brought into being by the disasters. By this I will make the case that disaster-driven art projects, such as Repairing Earthquake Project and Floodwall, are important actors in their own rights, articulating and indeed re-presenting the many issues and concerns that are part of disastrous events like 3.11 and Katrina.

### Floodwall

New Orleans-based artist Jana Napoli was one of thousands of affected people. Like many other residents she at first wanted to sit out the storm with her mother and neighbor in her home; however, the situation changed as the levees breached, and Napoli fled in her car (Napoli, *Interview*). Two months later Napoli returned to her home in New Orleans, and as she explain in an video interview on her website ([floodwall.org](http://floodwall.org)), the devastation that met her was unbearable. As she walked around her home area she realized that nothing was left; homes, communities, and lives had been inundated. She says that what struck her the most was the silence. A once thriving community had been turned into a wasteland. To Napoli this silence was telling in the sense that Katrina as a natural, technological, and social phenomenon triggered so many situations that are beyond words (Napoli, *Interview*).<sup>9</sup> However, as an artist, Napoli explains, she feels that her job is exactly to “[...] make images for the things people do not yet have words for [...]” (Napoli, *Interview*), a task she has taken seriously by beginning the art project Floodwall.

After walking around in the devastation talking to fellow ‘former’ residents for four months, Napoli started to collect household drawers that she came across: at first mostly intuitively, but soon deliberately. In areas where nothing was left, these everyday items seemed to have somehow survived, and even without the house, the drawers still had a strong sense of home (Napoli, *floodwall.org*): “[...] each of these is a household [...] for many

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<sup>9</sup> An important aspect of this, which I will unfortunately not be able to pay attention to here, is the social issues that Katrina brought forth for the world to see, as the waters retreated. See instead Nancy Tuana’s text *Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina*.



people this is all that is left of their entire history [...]” (Napoli, *Interview*). After Napoli had collected 710 drawers she decided to appropriate them as an artwork that would embody and speak for the many homes, people, and lives they represented. On large panels a hole was cut out for each drawer to be inserted. In the end a giant wall was raised, exhibiting the drawers side by side in a commemoration of the flood and all the lives it affected.

The art project has since been exhibited in several places in the United States and in Europe. In line with Napoli’s feeling that these items somehow came to represent the lives of their former displaced and perhaps even passed owners, she wrote the address of where each drawer was found on the drawer, in the event that they could be returned to their rightful owners. On her website there are a number of testimonies from people who found their drawers and are sharing the histories attached to them (Napoli, *floodwall.org*).

### **Re-presenting Disaster: Making Things Speak through Art**

Like Nishiko’s 3.11 art project, Napoli’s Floodwall can also be said to have been conceived and shaped entirely on the basis of Katrina and is, as such, inextricably tied to the disaster. Contrary to Nishiko, Napoli was very much implicated by the disaster herself; she did not have to volunteer or proactively act to become engaged, but was already part of the ‘disaster-network,’ so to speak. However, even though the point of entry was another, Napoli’s work also emerged from a collision between the many entities woven into Katrina.

Reformulated into Latourian concepts, Floodwall was also directly informed—that is, conceptualized and formalized—by the multitude of actors involved in and around the disaster. This is true in relation to the ‘actual’ disaster event—Katrina and the flood—and it is also the case regarding the local context, people she has encountered, and the drawers as the ‘things,’ or knots, of common concern in the execution of the project. With regard to both disasters the list of contributing and networking actors could in principle go on indefinitely, showing how an artistic actor-network established amidst something as complex as a disaster is likely to include myriads of heterogeneous entities.

In being hybrid—in being informed by the myriad actors of the disaster—the art projects come to articulate and give cultural shape to the many issues and concerns that are thoroughly entangled in the disasters and their aftermath. Put boldly, it is difficult to see how one may even utter the word ‘disaster’ without implicitly directing the attention

towards such issues and concerns. To paraphrase anthropologist Frida Hastrup in a recent keynote address to a conference on the cultural studies of disasters: the people involved in disasters, on the one hand, and ‘disasters’ as a phenomenon, on the other, continuously co-create each other. In other words, disasters are forged *as* disasters precisely because a destructive event, in turn, creates an affected public embodying a range of issues and concerns connected to the experience of being a victim of that disaster. The disaster becomes disastrous, we might say, in its entanglement with the issues and concerns caused for its victims. By implication, in being informed by the affected publics, I would argue that the art projects are also implicitly, even if not explicitly, dealing with the issues and concerns connected to the disasters.

When Nishiko and Napoli take the objects of the disasters seriously as things capable of uttering something important about the disastrous events, they come to re-present the issues and concerns—the ‘things’—intertwined in them and in the events they refer to. By then exhibiting them, they mobilize a dense network of heterogeneous actors all implicated in the disasters. In doing so the things come to re-present the concerns connected to and carried by them as actors. Furthermore, the artworks are not intended to be accurate representations of the disasters. They are not matter-of-factual, aimed at an exclamation on the ‘truth’ of 3.11 or Katrina. Rather, because these projects are conceptualized as artworks, as opposed to e.g. a scientific or journalistic account that appeals more to a matter-of-factual point of view, the broken things and the drawers—and the human interaction they evoke—come to mediate, translate, and re-present the truths of the many concerns attached to the disasters.

In short, Nishiko and Napoli are making the ‘things’ of the disaster speak through their artistic practices. Here, ‘things’ are taken in their Latourian sense as being both the objects and matters created by 3.11 (i.e. the broken items) as well as the worries, the issues, and the concerns enfolded into these. This process is evinced when Nishiko meticulously researches, documents, collects, and repairs the ‘broken things’ of Tohoku, or when Napoli collects, documents, and exhibits the drawers from destroyed homes. By making the ‘things’ speak, indeed by *letting* the ‘things’ speak, these artists are doing what Latour indicates as an ‘aesthetics of matters-of-concern.’ In being informed by the disasters, in following and partaking in the actor-networks around the disasters, such disaster-driven art projects put

the concerns of the disasters into focus and aesthetic form, whether deliberately or not, and re-present them back to concerned publics.

## Conclusion

This essay has introduced artist Nishiko and her post-3.11 art practice as an example and has related it to Jana Napoli's art project Floodwall effected by hurricane Katrina. I have analysed them as being informed by the disasters to such a strong degree that, I argue, they are inseparable from the many 'things' of the disaster from which they have been conceived and shaped. This is also why I have argued that the philosophy of Bruno Latour, his actor-network theory (ANT), the notion of *amodernity*, and specifically the concept of matters-of-concern are capable of providing analytical insight to the specific properties of such art practices. As Latour proposes, it is exactly the 'things' that matter to us, which tie us together most strongly and across differences, that might otherwise seem impossible to bridge or find a common ground for. This is also why these 'things' that matter hold an inherent *democratic* potential: once made public, they make us talk, discuss, and debate—all in stark contrast to the undemocratic short-circuiting effected by matters-of-fact. On this basis, Latour calls for *more* re-presentations, more mediation, and more translations of our matters-of-concern. To attain this, he suggests, we need new and different 'prosthetics' capable of re-presenting our matters-of-concern in publicly interesting ways.

It has not been my intention to argue that the disaster-driven art projects (merely) constitute such prosthetics to the 'things' that really matter; had this been the case, Latour would arguably hold little interest in or attraction to a theory of aesthetic practices. Rather, my intention has been to suggest that the 'things' of the art projects and the 'things' that matter to us are, in fact, *the same thing*—although, of course, in various shapes. Put differently, the purpose of the analysis has been to show that because the art projects are hybrid and thoroughly informed by the disasters and their many actors, the projects are not just 'representing' the various issues and concerns; instead, they are *part* of them, just as all the other actors engaged in the disasters. Indeed, I suggest that it is only because the art projects are part of the 'issue-networks' of the disasters—part of the network of actors gathered around the issues brought forth by the disasters—that they are also simultaneously and continuously re-presenting the concerns and issues tied to them.

This is what I have referred to as the double role and significance of the art projects. Hence, when looking at the art projects by Nishiko and Napoli via Latour, his philosophy can help us distill two interconnected ways of approaching the art projects. First, as I have shown, the art projects are employing a kind of ANT ‘method’ by following and engaging in the phenomena through the relational links, thus becoming actors themselves in the issue-network. In doing this, second, they come to re-present and mediate the matters-of-concern entangled in the disaster. This is not because they are outsiders capable of providing the ‘grand overview’ and ‘objective representations’ of the state of affairs, but because they are themselves a part of the issue-network around 3.11 and Katrina. This double role, it seems to me, constitutes a cultural significance of an aesthetics of matters-of-concern.

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