

## RESEARCH ESSAY

# Artistic Responses to Natural Disasters: The Case of New Orleans

Hakan Topal

State University of New York, USA  
[hakantopal@gmail.com](mailto:hakantopal@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

Alongside the ruins of asymmetrical warfare, we are now living in an era of unimaginable natural destruction. The irreversible effects of climate change, hurricanes, large-scale earthquakes and tsunamis haunt our social psyche and capture our imagination. These volatile occurrences are intensified as governments are unable to sufficiently handle the physical and emotional aftershocks of such catastrophes. In turn, the media transform the state's failure into a spectacle. Only after the media extravaganza settles down and the aid workers leave, do clean-up and reconstruction begin. Then, artists, designers and social scientists start to employ visual and spatial strategies to make sense of what really happened. With the help of local and international art organizations, artists tackle the human condition and our innermost collective fears to rethink life in the wake of natural disasters. In this article, I critically identify some of the artistic and spatial practices and their manifestations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. How are these art and design projects being effectively employed? How do they tackle issues such as loss, compassion, empathy, violence, human rights, and social justice? In order to map out conceptual strategies that engage the idea of nature and the built environment, one needs to question the idea of the community, and how it is manifested in urban space.

This article relies on my dissertation research that I conducted between 2008 to 2011 in New Orleans. I extensively researched the Prospect New Orleans Biennial, observing day-to-day operations, engaging in conversations with the biennial staff, interviewing artists and curators, and gathering hundreds of documents, press releases, board minutes, financial and auditing reports, images and videos. While I was in New Orleans, I had the chance to conduct video interviews with artists, frequently visit biennial sites and engage with artists in various intellectual dialogues. Most importantly, through this research, I grasped the complex nature of interpersonal relationships between the cultural workers associated with different biennial venues.

## Background: Community as Victim

"There is no such thing as a natural disaster," a catastrophe occurs when there is inadequate emergency preparedness, improper civil infrastructure and urban planning. The scale of the devastation exponentially increases in areas where structural social injustices are evident (Smith, 2006). In late August 2005, a category-5 hurricane overlapped with a high-tide and particularly low air pressure, generating a huge storm surge. The vulnerable levee system collapsed in many locations, letting tens of billions of gallons of water flow into the New Orleans water basin. By September 1<sup>st</sup>, the whole city was flooded, crippling the electrical systems and water pump stations. In certain areas, floodwater surged so fast that residents did not have any time to evacuate their neighborhoods to shelter in higher grounds. The New Orleans' natural environment was damaged; much of the marshland disappeared, and toxic waste from run-down buildings and rotten food created a serious health issue. This drastic failure of civil infrastructure was accompanied by a completely inadequate emergency response by the Bush Administration. A government agency, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) was responsible for providing the emergency relief, but failed to deliver necessary assistance with utmost ineptitude. Hundreds of thousands of people were left unassisted in horrendous conditions, simply waiting for help to arrive.

At least 1,464 Louisiana residents died, and the storm forced more than a million people to relocate. The New Orleans population fell from around 490,000 (April 2000) to approximately 210,000 (July 2006) – a

decrease of half of the city's residents. The city barely recovered in 2015 with an estimate population of 436,000, still much less than the number before Katrina (Schigoda, 2011; The Data Center, 2016).

During the hurricane, one of the most affected areas was the Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly black neighborhood, where over 90% of homes were destroyed, and hundreds died. In fact, Katrina revealed the long-ignored social-cultural and racial inequalities in New Orleans, where a neighborhood's social outlook quickly changes from block to block. Skin color works as a concealed tagging system for strict ethno-racial segregation. In the Southern United States, during the Jim Crow era between 1877–1954, racial segregation was enforced by violent policing and segregationist laws. However, today segregation is kept in place through economic means, and sheer police brutality continues to play an important role in class relations (Strolovitch, et al., 2006). In fact, the New Orleans Police Department is known to be one of the most 'brutal, corrupt, and incompetent police units in the United States' (Moore, 2010; Ramsey, 2015). Racist police crimes, attacks and abuses are common and usually target the African American population.

During the aftermath of the hurricane, while the social arm of the state failed, in order to sustain law and the order, the repressive arm steadfastly acted based on racist prejudices; amid lootings and mass social unrest, the local government and police utilized excessive power specifically targeting blacks. The media amplified the racist representations, which "provided justification for the following heavy-handed action taken by the military and police in response to the disaster (Sommers, et al., 2006). On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued a controversial order authorizing soldiers to shoot to kill looters in an effort to restore calm" (Pass, 2011). Pictures of devastation, death, consequent looting and hopelessness were aired on national media. The absolute devastation of the city of New Orleans, especially the Lower Ninth Ward, became the epicenter of public debate. Amid the Bush administration's inadequate handling of the emergency response, charities, NGOs and grassroots organizations mobilized to relocate displaced residents, participated in the cleaning and rebuilding efforts, and provided psychological support to residents for post-traumatic stress.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the costliest disasters in the US history, considering the scale of the devastation one can argue that both the artistic and the design projects that I discuss in this article could only make a miniscule impact. Although they are not intended to replace the large-scale reconstruction efforts, these projects provide numerous instances for careful consideration. Architectural initiatives such as *Make it Right's* housing projects, Architecture for Humanity's *The Biloxi Model Home Program*, the Tulane University Architecture Department's *UrbanBuild*, and Global Green USA's *Build It Back Green Program* are noteworthy examples (Charlesworth & Ahmed, 2015). Among these initiatives, *Make it Right*, a not-for-profit organization established by actor Brad Pitt and Berlin-based architectural firm Graft, is perhaps the most ambitious of them of all and received significant media attention. The *Make It Right* foundation invited 21 world-renowned architects, including Frank Garry, David Adjaye and Morphosis, to design affordable houses for the low-income families in the Lower Ninth Ward, where 4,000 homes had been wiped out. Houses were developed within a 20-block radius and designed to meet LEED platinum certification with a maximum cost of \$200 per square foot (Make It Right, 2012). Housing plans with architectural renderings were developed in varying architectural styles and were presented to the community for them to select their own designs. In negotiations with the city and the local community, many model houses were built with volunteer efforts. In many ways, their volunteer-NGO work compensated the lack of resources made evident during the post-Katrina reconstruction efforts; FEMA's privatized emergency relief efforts hurt many homeowners and businesses as many of the contractors simply preferred to work with the government. High costs, slow insurance payments, and lack of government support created a vacuum of services especially for low-income families, who could not afford to pay a premium. To complicate things further, with the support of FEMA, the New Orleans local government decided to demolish 4,500 public housing projects, which were built during the New Deal era (1933–1937). This public housing was not damaged by the Hurricane, and could have been re-occupied with little work. Instead, the local authorities utilized Katrina as an opportunity to restructure the city's ethnic, social and economic outlook by aggressively displacing the black population out of the city center (Ourroussoff, 2006).

Many of these not-for-profit architectural projects were put forward with utmost good intentions and helped keep these low income communities intact by not only generating media attention but also by providing them much needed support for housing. They were successful formal exercises, yet, due to the lack of any master planning, projects remained within the practical limits of previous home parcels. When we glance at the well-executed renderings, one realizes that conceptual frameworks are limited to the reiteration of glorified American suburban life; a nuclear happy family, dogs and stylish cars are presented in the renderings, which merely depict a fiction (Make It Right, 2014) (**Figures 1 and 2**).

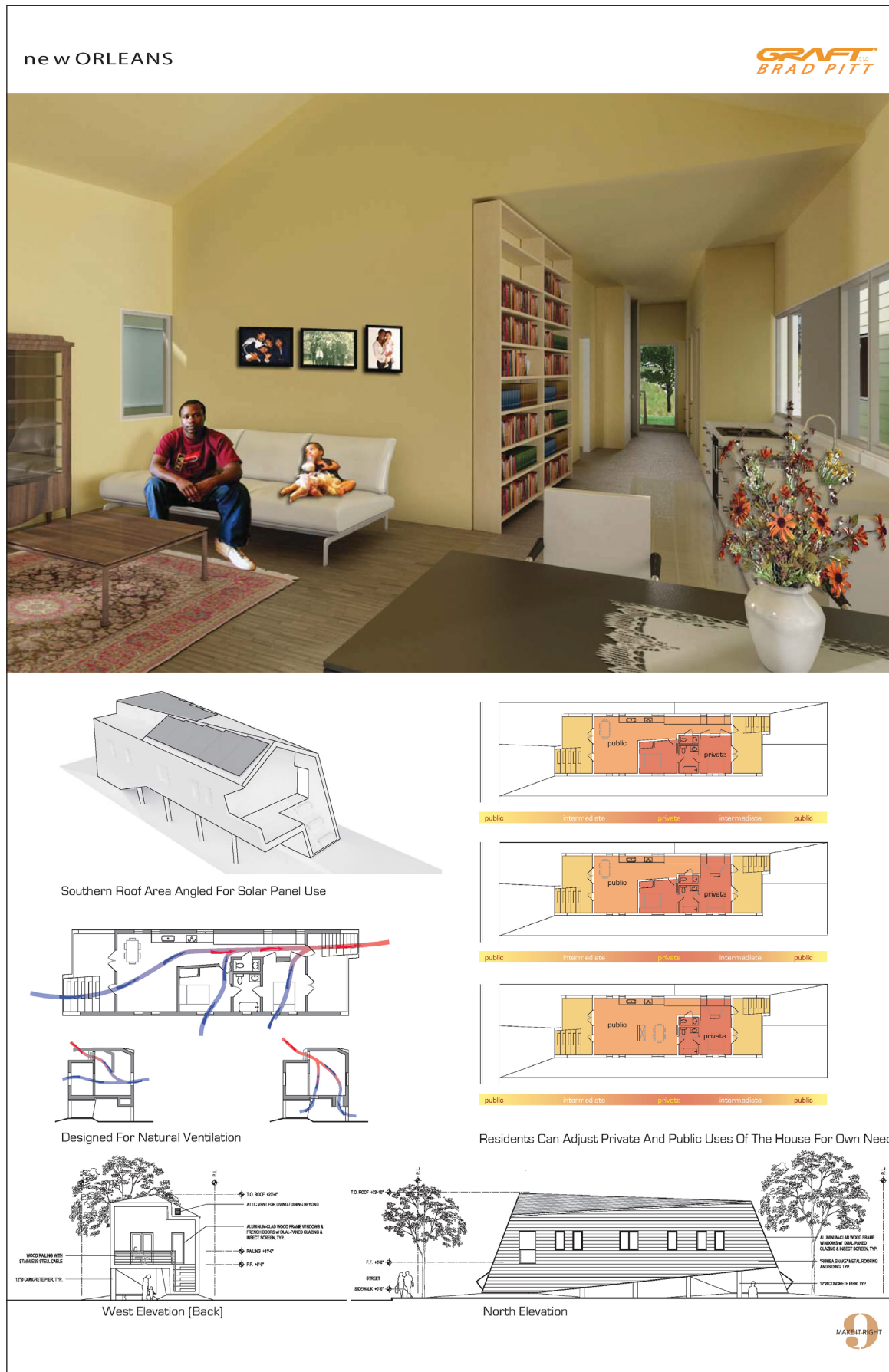


**Figure 1:** Design Submission by Graft with Brad Pitt (Make It Right, 2014).

These projects lacked a social vision and remain as missed opportunities to critically rethink the New Orleans Lower Ninth Ward and its troubled social history. A moralistic emphasis on the idea of community, fundamentality undermines the fact that the celebrated community itself is a byproduct of decades of racial segregation. My criticism is tied to the architect's rather adaptable responses to RFPs (Request for Proposals) which emphasized family, community, the private space, sustainability, ecology, and yet none of them destabilized the uneasy spatial-social relationships to compassionately rethink the idea of community in relationship to a new imagined community which can be healed through design processes.

Community as "one of the most studied subjects in sociology" appears to be a problematic issue in socially-engaged art and design projects (Gielen, 2011). The notion of community, which was instrumentalized as a given entity, defies the notion of democratic association or participation. It is full of moral assumption; a good community. In other words, a community is not a union, association or a political party organized according to democratic principles. Community points to an essential commonality of a group of people without guaranteeing their participation and the exclusion of others. Community is not a society whose existence is characterized through set of [inclusive or exclusive] laws exercised by the state apparatus. Community is an organic unity, which is constituted through "fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities", community is about "sharing, distribution" among members, therefore it needs to be problematized by cultural producers (Nancy, 1991).





**Figure 2:** Design Submission by Graft with Brad Pitt (Make It Right, 2014).

One can argue that architecture is a disciplinary practice which functions within the envelop of power dynamics and social conventions. In order to destabilize the preexisting protocols, one needs to turn their attention to poetic enunciations. For that, it would be useful to look into artistic interventions in New Orleans. New-York based art organizations such as Creative Time and the U.S. Biennial Inc. (which organized the Prospect New Orleans Biennial) produced numerous site-specific projects in the Lower Ninth Ward that are historically significant, multi-dimensional and could be interpreted beyond humanitarian reactions.

In November 2006, a year after Hurricane Katrina, New York-based artist Paul Chan went to New Orleans and when he confronted the absolute destruction, emptiness and debris, he wanted to respond to this

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Waiting for GODOT

~~no home~~  
~~respect~~

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(Intersection of N. Prieur and Reynes)

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(Intersection of Warrington and Robert E. Lee)

★ *Starring* ★  
Wendell Pierce (star of HBO's *The Wire*)  
J Kyle Manzay ★ T. Ryder Smith ★ Mark McLaughlin

*Director*  
Christopher McElroen

*Artistic Director*  
Paul Chan

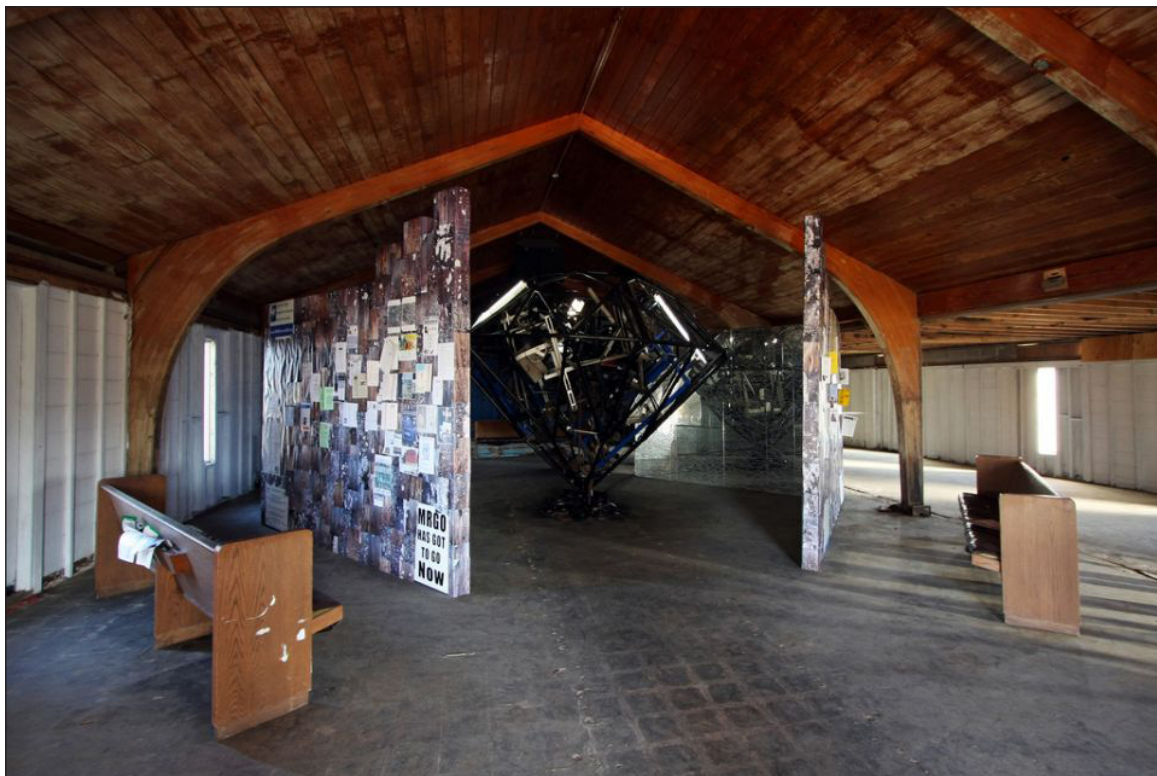
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★ Presented by Creative Time in collaboration with the Classical Theatre of Harlem and New Orleans' Partners: University of New Orleans, Xavier University, Dillard University, NOCCA High School, Lusher High School, Frederic Douglass High School, John McDonough High School, Students at the Center, Neighborhood Story Project, The Porch, Renaissance Project, Neighborhood ambassador Robert Lynn Green Sr. and the rest of the good peoples in the city of New Orleans. ★

Figure 3: *Waiting for Godot* Flyer. Directed by Paul Chan, Produced by Creative Time, 2007.

situation (Chan, 2007). After spending some time in New Orleans, thinking about participation and desolation, he considered that Samuel Beckett's famous play *Waiting For Godot* would be appropriate to stage in the empty streets of New Orleans (**Figure 3**). He took the project to Creative Time, an organization, which specializes in producing public art. During a period of nine months, Chan and Creative Time worked with community organizers, universities, and art centers to discuss the project. They collectively organized lectures, talks, dinners, and potlucks to gather people, and to form a community around the project. Curator Nato Thompson states that eventually all these efforts went towards the "production of a public", which was the one of the most difficult tasks of the whole project (Thompson, 2010). Creative Time and Chan approached the Harlem Theater players and Christopher McElroen to direct the play, which essentially became a contemplative reflection on the conflicting conditions of New Orleans. The public reception was exceptionally positive. The stage, actors, site and most importantly Beckett's very powerful play, came together to present a powerful experience. In addition to orchestrating a successful play, Chan wanted to do more for New Orleans and was concerned about how to generate support to help its people. He states that he did not want to simply leave after realizing the project. In order to transform their engagement into crystallized results, Chan intended to give some money back to the community and subsequently they established a "Shadow Fund" to support artists and art organizations in New Orleans. They raised \$50,000 to donate to local organizations with a couple of thousand dollars each (Creative Time, 2007). In the Creative Time promotional video about *Waiting For Godot* in New Orleans, Chan states that there should be "sustainability" of the project (*Waiting For Godot in New Orleans Promotional Video*, 2008). He did not want to simply utilize the local conditions as a backdrop to realize his own artistic project, but through public engagement and organization, he intended to deliver something beyond art.

In a similar manner, for the 2008 Prospect.1 New Orleans Biennial, Nari Ward decided to use the historic Battle Ground Baptist church, located in the Lower Ninth Ward; it was one of the few remaining structurally safe buildings. Ward's work was titled *Diamond Gym; Action Network*, and was specifically developed for the Battle Ground Baptist church (**Figure 4**). Composed of various-sized wall mirrors, old discarded exercise machines, weights, bicycles, and treadmills, the artist created a diamond shaped central sculptural element which was approximately 11 by 6 feet in size, mounted to the floor. *Diamond Gym* was surrounded by mirrored freestanding walls and the viewer entered the space, where the diamond shaped structure was installed, from two directions. The exterior of the freestanding wall was also used as a community bulletin board where



**Figure 4:** Nari Ward, *Diamond Gym: Action Network*, 2008; Battleground Baptist Church in Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans.



people could come and put up their announcements. Inside, the mirrored surface, a big diamond shape of pipes and gym equipment intended to overwhelm and disorient the viewer “to reconfigure the relationship with the space” (Ward, 2010). In addition, there was a continuous soundtrack filling the church; voices of African American leaders such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey were utilized in order to provide an uplifting character for the installation. In the soundtrack’s background, Ward incorporated Tina Turner’s chanting of a Buddhist song. Combining spiritual chanting was meant to provide a motivational rhythm to the environment, and to evoke the previous spirituality of the church space. Ward states that he did not want to create a work of grief and sadness, but rather he wanted to encourage the audience to hope for the possibility of a better future, calling them to action by using motivational music and information provided on the community bulletin board (Ward, 2010). In order to collect the right information for them, he went to different foundations around the city and assembled announcements, pamphlets and brochures, placing them on the community board as useful funding applications for action. He states that he specifically selected grant application forms about the possible funding opportunities in order to call the community to self-empowerment.

Many of the Prospect.1 New Orleans Biennial artists such as Mark Bradford, Anne Deleporte, Wangechi Mutu, Janine Antoni, Miguel Palma and Robin Rhode extensively utilized the most devastated neighborhood in New Orleans, the Lower Ninth Ward. They developed site-specific projects that tackle the issues raised by Katrina, but beyond that they responded to the particularity of the neighborhood by producing works that directly engaged with the immediate surroundings of this empty neighborhood. Among these, perhaps one of the most muted—and underappreciated—artistic gestures belonged to the Danish artist group Superflex. As visitors proceeded to the back room of the Lower Ninth Ward Village—a not-for-profit community space which was destroyed during the Hurricane—they entered an unassuming exhibition room, previously utilized as an office space, with one simple black and white photograph with the following short caption:

This Danish Family bought their house in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina caused a drop in the interest rates in Denmark, enabling the family to afford the house. This photograph has the price of \$20,000 equivalent to the amount the family saved buying their house. When sold, the money will be spent on construction materials to be used by families in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans (Superflex, 2008) (**Figure 5**).

With this work, Superflex refers to a real-life event about a family based in Denmark. The photograph *When The Levees Broke We Bought Our House* was produced specifically for the biennial. Superflex’s original intention was utterly different. When they visited New Orleans, they proposed to open up a community bar to distribute free beer to people in the neighborhood. They argued that, like food, health services, and education, beer should be free to the public. The proposed project could not be realized due to bureaucratic reasons—opening a bar in the Lower Ninth Ward required an extensive licensing procedure; in addition, the neighborhood was not safe to manage such a space at night. Therefore, the biennial suggested that Superflex propose a different idea. Instead of a community bar, they came up with a rather humble artistic solution to show a single photograph with a caption (**Figure 6**). Superflex points out that due to the hurricane, there was a slowing down in the housing market worldwide; consequently, Danish financial institutions temporarily dropped their interest rates. Thanks to this devastating hurricane, mortgages dropped in such a way that a Danish family, friends of Superflex, could purchase their home (Superflex, 2008).

The photograph beautifully summarizes Hurricane Katrina’s economic impact on the global economy. It depicts a modernist house and a family peacefully eating their lunch at a picnic table under a big tree, the parents are drinking their tea or coffee, the child is playing with a toy, there is a hammock referring to leisurely time. The large-format photograph renders the minor details of the faces, clothes, house and its context: happy times.

‘The reason we made that work is so that the person who lives in NOLA and has that experience of his or her own personal economy should learn about the global factors involved. We wanted to highlight how the system is connected. We wanted to show that friends of ours, when they went to the bank, were directly told by the banker that there was a connection. We have been discussing this with banking and financial people and we are told that there are common economic issues involved. It might feel strange for someone outside that sector, but these variables impact other things in amazing ways that aren’t always obvious’ (Christiansen, 2009).

The photograph was not sold, and no collector even approached Superflex. Nevertheless, the piece still plays an important emblematic function betraying the intricate relationships between the speculative global



**Figure 5:** *When The Levees Broke We Bought Our House*, Superflex, 2008. Credits: Hakan Topal.

economy, and the vulnerabilities of local communities and their exposure to catastrophic events. The association between a Danish family and the people of the Lower Ninth Ward provides a self-reflexive memo; opens a window into an art collective's own social-economic conditions as European/white petit-bourgeois and their significance as artists. By 'reading' the details of the photograph we get many clues about where the artists are coming from, how they live, what their environment looks like. Their critique is very poignant in the context of the Lower Ninth Ward; how the welfare of a family in Denmark is dependent on the suffering of people in New Orleans and while the global capitalist system is intimately connected, people's destiny is tied together through a speculative capitalist logic.

### Healing The Community

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy states that the idea of community is tied to the nostalgic notion of communion; when the traditional community encountered the harsh reality of modernism, the intimacy of the communion was lost. As a melancholic concept, community refers to lost intimate associations. Both





**Figure 6:** *When The Levees Broke We Bought Our House*, Superflex, 2008.

conservative and neoconservative attacks on progressive politics rely on the longing for a past or “original community”, a “lost community”. In that regard, especially in American politics, both in its conservative and liberal enunciations, community is utilized haphazardly to describe a group of people who have the same identity and destiny. For instance, we talk about “the gay community”, “hunter community”, “Muslim community”, “art community” and so on. There is a fundamental problem with the traditional idea of community as it rejects the possibility of individual difference, social diversity and hybridity. In order to sustain the existence of the community, the individual has to sacrifice himself/herself. The ultimate form of this sacrifice would be death for the community. This is the community of others. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject (Nancy, 1991, p. 15). Additionally, being part of a community requires that one has to give up his or her subject position, and dedicate himself/herself to the cause of community. As opposed to society, community does not recognize the extensive legal rights of an individual nor implies a democratic/agonistic involvement, as it imposes its traditional order to sustain the existence of community as a whole. Nancy claims that this conservative idea is carried through various other social and modernist projects throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; for instance, similar to religious/moral enunciation of community, Soviet Communism demanded commitment from an individual, who needed to sacrifice himself for the idea of commune.

Considering the fact that the community of the Lower Ninth Ward is the byproduct of centuries of racial/economic segregation and violence, without ‘healing’ the community through radical social-political power rearrangements, many of these good-hearted renovation projects turn into middle-of-the-road reform projects; including updating the living habitats, providing funding, raising media awareness and so on. Sociologist Pascal Gielen points out the “digestive effect of community art”—art which “is done without questioning the dominant values, norms or habits” conforms into and naturalizes the dominant power structures, often with the support of global corporations and governments (Gielen, 2011, p. 21). All these aforementioned architectural projects, by Paul Chan, Nari Ward, and Superflex, to a certain degree wanted to give something back to the local community by strategically utilizing therefore legitimizing already existing dominant social-political structures. However, Superflex’s gesture stands out as more than a gracious artistic

production. With its “subversive character” Superflex escapes from conformism by problematizing the very idea of “giving back” and “empowering the community”. Since as a “fictitious commodity,” artwork’s value is generated through pure speculation, by invoking this ambiguity, they invite us to radically deliberate on the idea of victimhood, speculation philanthropic giving, and finally representation.

Finally, artists and designers can play a significant role in reimagining the community by actively engendering experimental encounters that can ignite democratic disagreements. Altruistic approaches rather dull the ability to negate, disturb and provoke the given status quo. Art is more powerful when it moves beyond its instrumentalization by external forces. By trying to be useful for a community, it becomes like any other institutionalized discipline or a job. Crisis and long lasting social issues require dedicated attention by stable social state institutions. Within the neoliberal realm, where the state is pushed out from its social duties, sometimes artists, designers and organizations fall into traps of claiming to fill the social gap. While I recognize the fact that within a competitive art funding ecosystem artists and art organizations desperately try to justify their existence by claiming they are providing much needed help for people, giving education or supporting communities, artists’ role is not to fulfill the very duties of the social state. On the contrary, their very inadequate altruistic work and good-hearted small art gestures undermine their social responsibilities as independent agents of radical change.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Information

Hakan Topal, Assistant Professor of New Media and Art+Design, Purchase College, State University of New York, USA.

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