

Vitreous Archives: Fire, Transfigured Objects, and the Collecting Impulse

Stephanie Trigg
University of Melbourne

IN 1666, SAMUEL PEPYS WROTE of the devastating effects of fire on the city of London. Few lives were lost, but the fire destroyed thousands of houses, churches, and other buildings.¹ On Wednesday, September 5, the fourth day of the fire, Pepys describes the apocalyptic scene: “I [went] up to the top of Barkeing steeple, and there saw the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw. Everywhere great fires. Oyle-cellars and brimstone and other things burning. I became afeared to stay there long; and therefore down again as fast as I could, the fire being spread as far as I could see it.”² But later that day, he went out walking again in Cheapside: “And took up (which I keep by me) a piece of glass of Mercers’ chapel in the street, where much more was, so melted and buckled with the heat of the fire, like parchment.”³ Out of these scenes of civic devastation, Pepys takes up a piece of glass as a souvenir, lifting it out of the public wreckage of a named and sacred place⁴ and moving it into the more restricted, secular, and private ambit of his

¹ This essay was written with the thoughtful assistance of Helen Hickey and Anne McKendry and the helpful advice and suggestions of Valerie Krips and Grace Moore. Any infelicities and mistakes are my own. Research was supported by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (project number CE110001011).

² Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), 7: 276.

³ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁴ D. J. Keene and Vanessa Harding, “St. Mary Colechurch 105/18,” *Historical Gazetteer of London Before the Great Fire Cheapside...* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 1987), 490–517, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-gazetteer-pre-fire/pp490-517>. The Mercers’ Chapel in Cheapside had originally been dedicated to St. Thomas à Beckett (the saint was reputedly born close by) but had been used by the Mercers’ Company since 1542. Repairs were frequently required, and three new windows had been installed as recently as 1631–32.



own person as he keeps it by him. Pepys thus makes his own miniature and personal memorial from the midst of a civic disaster.

Pepys does not say—and may not have been able to tell—whether the glass was originally colored or clear, but his description of it as melted and buckled “like parchment” is striking. It seems to refer equally to the touch as well as the appearance of this melted glass. In any case, his description captures his sense of having found a curious marvel, something he could carry away as a talisman or souvenir, as a reminder of the lost window, the trauma of the fire, and his walking through the ruins.

The impulse to collect objects damaged by, or preserved through, the ravages of fire is a familiar one. This essay attempts to work through some of the continuities and discontinuities of this impulse across two different periods and two calamitous fires: the Great Fire of London in 1666 and the bushfires in the Australian state of Victoria in February 2009, known as the Black Saturday fires. This work focuses on the preservation of objects that have been ruined, burned, or broken by fire. What can these charred and damaged but strangely precious souvenirs tell us about the history of the way we respond to, remember, and commemorate fire, both personally and institutionally? What kinds of comparisons can we draw between the impulse to collect glass and other fire-damaged objects between the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries? And finally, how can such transhistorical comparisons improve our understanding of both the emotional relationships between people and things and the effects of fire on the material world?

The essay concentrates on objects made of glass because the very materiality of glass (the way it is both forged by and vulnerable to great heat) and its rich cultural history offer some surprising continuities and discontinuities between the premodern and modern periods, particularly in the history of collectible objects and the “aura” they seem to hold or project. The little moment in which Pepys takes up this fragment of glass is my chief historical text. Pepys’s diary includes an astonishing and sustained account of the Great Fire that burnt London in 1666 and its aftermath for the citizens of London. His retrieval and preservation of this piece of glass offer some unusual contrasts with material examples from both the Museum of London’s collection of objects that survive from 1666 and Museums Victoria’s vast assembly of artifacts, pictures, photographs, and memorials gathered after the Victorian fires of 2009.

Glass and fire—a composite material and a dynamic element—share a special relationship. Fire and heat are necessary for the making of glass, a process in which human agency shapes purposeful designs of beauty and utility.⁵ In her study of Victorian glass culture, Isobel Armstrong emphasizes the quality of human breath that was a component of all preindustrial glassmaking,⁶ but heat and fire are equally crucial. Armstrong also embeds the idea of human labor into her study: “A glass artefact always arrived with a history of labour and transformation embedded in its material, prior to its existence as a finished product.”⁷ Whether twisted or blown by human breath, poured into molds by mechanized processes, or floated on baths of molten tin to make sheets for windows, the formation of glass always marks a kind of temporal pause in a physical transition, the moment when the intense heat drops and the liquid form of glass crystallizes into hardness. The very materiality of glass constitutes a temporal archive, recalling the time

⁵ Glass, such as volcanic obsidian or meteorite tektites, can also be formed by natural forces.

⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4–5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

before it was melted and formed at great heat and then solidified as it was poured or blown into purposeful shape.

Intense, accidental fire, such as the fire of 1666 or the Victorian bushfires, transforms, reshapes and recolors glass into shapes that are far less regulated and ordered, though they still retain their material form as glass. Crystal and glass objects are particularly evocative as fire memorials and are often collected in the aftermath of a fire. Fire and heat were instrumental in their first making and then again in their unmaking or remaking into different shapes, whether those shapes are now just slumped messes or fragments that suggest other images or narratives, like the “melted and buckled” glass that appears to Pepys like parchment.

In trying to analyze the variegated histories of these fire-objects through the various stages of their making, remaking, and collecting, we may invoke some recent work in the theory of material things and objects and human interactions with them. Jonathan Gil Harris, in *Untimely Matter*, observes that object theory had previously not taken much account of temporality.⁸ He argues that the study of historical objects, especially in the study of the Renaissance, had not escaped the question of alterity that still dogged the history of material culture: the inhibiting “temporal propriety” that potentially locks objects into a finite, firmly bounded past. He offers a far more nuanced understanding of the way material objects contain traces and memories of their own complex histories.

Harris draws on insights from Bruno Latour and Michel Serres, who both show how objects bring together different temporalities. These may take varying forms, for example, the ancient idea and use of a hammer that is embodied in a modern hammer or the continued use of ancient objects and structures such as Roman walls, in sixteenth-century London. Harris develops a lexicon through which we can conceptualize the relationships between material objects and temporality: the twinned concepts of polychronicity and multitemporality. Polychronicity is understood here as the sense in which objects “collate diverse moments in time,”⁹ for example, the prior history of bottles or windows that come together in the shape and use of a particular bottle or window. An object’s multitemporality, on the other hand, comes to the fore when it provokes reflection on “the relations between now and then, old and new, before and after.”¹⁰ When an object undergoes a radical transformation like burning or melting, we may see it as haunted by its previous form. Molten glass can equally appear as an indeterminate lump whose history is unknown once it is taken out of original context.

A piece of window glass, for example, condenses several moments in time and invites reflections on other temporalities, while also marking a sheer boundary between two realms, inside and outside. In addition to the long history of forming and using glass in this way, the polychronicity of a particular window holds together the longer growth and formation of its various ingredients (silica, wood, lime, plants, etc.) and then the combination of those ingredients and their transformation under extreme, but controlled, heat into clear or colored glass. That glass is spread into shape as it cools in a different moment; and then later it becomes smaller fragments as it is cut, held together with lead, and assembled into a window frame. A second phase comes when that window is overcome again by fire (whether a catastrophic urban fire in 1666 or a devastating bushfire in 2009), when it burns and bubbles into molten liquid and then cools again into

⁸ Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

a solid object, though fragmented into smaller pieces. All these successive moments of heating and cooling constitute a distinctive form of vitreous polychronic materiality, especially when the collected object has an archive tracing it back to its original, or earlier, form.

The multitemporal dimensions of fire-forged glass can similarly be compounded in many ways. Pepys's glass may well have been cut and colored in a window that bore the distinctive images of Christian eschatology, gesturing to another temporal dimension altogether. Describing the fragment's appearance, Pepys compares it to something that now resembles an animal product—parchment, a material substance that has itself undergone chemical and physical treatment to become a writing surface. In what Harris might describe as a multitemporal reflection, Pepys's comparison reminds us that despite the widespread use of paper since the fifteenth century, parchment was still a familiar enough commodity in the seventeenth century to serve as the basis for this comparison. The simile "dates" Pepys's description but also conjures a time when parchment and paper would equally be used for writing: the official documents Pepys might use in the Admiralty would be prepared on parchment, whereas his own journal was written on paper.

The piece of glass that Pepys picked up from the Mercers' Chapel windows has not survived, but we can find a visual comparison for his memento in the Museum of London, which holds several pieces of twisted and tangled glass that were found when a cellar under Pudding Lane, where the fire started (less than half a mile from the Mercers' Chapel), was uncovered when foundations were being dug for a new building in 1979 (**FIGURE 1**). The museum's online catalog describes them as fragments of "clear" glass and quotes the same passage from Pepys with which I opened this essay. But the very fact of their preservation in the museum frames them in a different temporal and cultural context altogether.

In the form of beads, jewelry, bottles, bowls, and other vessels, glass objects from different eras feature regularly in museums, so the substance itself is neither rare nor remarkable. These



FIGURE 1. Melted window glass excavated from Pudding Lane in the 1970s, © Museum of London.

burned and broken fragments are important and collectible only because they mark a historical moment. They owe their preservation in a museum to the historical accident of being buried under the rebuilt streets of London after the fire. Even if more individuals like Pepys had retrieved and kept more such pieces of glass in the seventeenth century, they would have been kept only in a personal or private collection or a cabinet of curiosities. The idea that a public museum might collect and display such remains and fragments depends on the much more recent concept, developed only since the 1960s, that ordinary, damaged, or ruined objects can tell a historical story of significance.

Contemporary museums now play a very distinctive role in preserving the memory of major events. Within a week of the devastating bushfires in Victoria in 2009, it became clear that Museums Victoria would come to host an important archive of the fire, serving as a significant repository for the experiences of Victorians, even if most of the collection has not been publicly displayed.¹¹ This is an important distinction between the London and the Melbourne fire collections: when I refer to the latter, I mean only the online catalog, not any physical exhibition.

The Black Saturday fires consisted of roughly four hundred fires that began on February 7, 2009. The temperature reached 46 degrees Celsius (over 114 degrees Fahrenheit) with winds of over one hundred kilometers an hour recorded. The event killed 173 people, injured 414, destroyed 2,100 houses, and displaced over 7,500 people from their homes. Eventually, the fire extended over a million acres. It is estimated that the energy released by the fires that day was the equivalent to 1,500 bombs of the size that were dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945.¹²

After such desolation, the domestic routines and personal and communal relationships of thousands of people were devastated. Even returning to their burned homes was often not possible for several days as whole townships were sealed off for the identification and removal of bodies and other forensic investigations. Many towns and homes were identified as potential crime scenes in the suspicion that arson had been involved in a number of these fires.

As people were slowly allowed back to their homes, the process of combing through the rubble threw up some astonishing objects. Some had miraculously come through the fire unscathed; others had been transfigured by fire, and many of these were made from glass. Some of these objects were given to Museums Victoria at a very early stage; others were donated much later. The temporality of the collecting impulse and the transition of these souvenirs or memorials from private into public hands were themselves emotionally fraught.

The glass objects that made their way into the museum are quite varied in their relation to their original forms. Many were simply melted into lumps; others were “fused” with other objects or materials, telling composite narratives of the fire’s passing through townships and houses at great speed, the intensity of the heat, and in many instances, the collapse of houses—the blurring of upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside.

One of the most spectacular objects is an amalgam of glass, ceramic, and metal that was found in the ruins of a house in Yarra Glen. Household objects made of clear and pink glass have fused with blue and white ceramics of kitchen china (possibly a piece of Willow pattern china) and a metal fitting that encircled a water pipe under the house’s floorboards (**FIGURE 2**).

¹¹ Museums Victoria is the governing body of Melbourne Museum in Carlton, which houses the bushfire collections, as well as the Immigration Museum, Scienceworks, and other museums. For more information, see <https://museums victoria.com.au/>.

¹² Black Saturday Fires, Virtualtopia, Accessed 2 October, 2021, <https://blacksaturdayfires.com>.



FIGURE 2. Fused glass, ceramic, and metal from Yarra Glen, Feb. 7, 2009, Museums Victoria.

Different substances and discrete household items, each with their own distinctive domestic use, have been welded to a functional part of the house: inside and outside are brought together as the house collapses. The metal ring support for the plastic water pipe is especially poignant: a pipe that might have carried water from pumps to the roof and saved the house has simply melted away.

The wavelike movement of the glass and the distinctive combination of materials produce a sculptural effect, one that suggests the movement of water, but was in fact produced by fast-moving fireballs. The reshaped glass testifies to the capacity of the extreme temperatures of a catastrophic bushfire to fuse and condense matter but also to create beauty and dynamic shapes and colors, as well as ruins. Its owner donated this fused object to Museums Victoria only after it had been displayed at Three Stories Artspace in Healesville in the exhibition *Resurrected: Objects, Memories, Stories*. This exhibition ran from March 28 to May 30 in 2009. Thus, the transition from ruin to artwork was almost instantaneous: this evocative object was exhibited in a gallery less than three weeks after being recovered from the rubble of its owner's house. When it was later donated to Museums Victoria, it brought this trace of its early history as art object into the context of a historical collection.

Another object in Museums Victoria's collection that forms a useful comparison to the window glass retrieved from the London fire is a clump of dark glass: the remains of a floor-to-ceiling plate glass window that simply melted in the extreme heat of the fire that burned Bill Coppinger's house in Mount Disappointment in Kilmore, north of Melbourne (**FIGURE 3**).

The house had been built with large glass windows to maximize the view, to bring the outside in, as it were. Coppinger was well prepared for the fire, with sprinklers installed under the house and on the roof, as well as other sprinkler and spray systems in place, so he stayed to "defend" his house against the fires. But the heat and flames were so intense that the house burned around him: the windows in particular seeming to melt and disappear before his eyes as



FIGURE 3. Slumped glass from Mount Disappointment, Feb. 7, 2009, Museums Victoria.

he became trapped in the house. In an interview with Liza Dale-Hallett of Museums Victoria, he describes being caught in the house and moving from one room to another, believing he was “burning to death,” seeing floors and walls almost evaporate as he watched. Eventually he escaped the burning house by putting himself through a double glass door that seemed to have evaporated or melted at that moment:

The black bit in Paddy’s window was not on fire. It wasn’t on fire so I ran through it. That’s... my feet ran through it. So I ran back towards Paddy’s room, and I... a couple of people have asked me about it and I’ve tried to understand what was happening, and all I can say is it was... there was no plan, I wasn’t trying to get outside, I honestly believe I was burning to death, and maybe if I was moving, or I might... it was, when is this going to start to hurt? So I’ll run. I wasn’t running anywhere, I was running to something that wasn’t on fire. Or something that wasn’t, you know, wasn’t as hot. I can’t tell you, I can’t explain to you what it was and I put myself through his fly wire door and his double glass door. Put myself head first straight through, out on to his deck... I went through the glass and landed out on his deck and I lit up like a roman candle.¹³

Coppinger and Dale-Hallett visited the house together in the weeks after the fire when he had recovered from his injuries. She interviewed him there about his experience and the objects he donated to the museum, and both can remember seeing the solidified melted glass “running down the hill.”¹⁴ This piece of slumped glass is one of the few things that remain from the conflagration and the surreal experience of seeing the once solid house and its many glass walls dissolve into air, ash, and liquid glass around him.

¹³ Bill Coppinger, interview with Liza Dale-Hallett, March 26, 2009, transcription sighted by the author, January 13, 2015.

¹⁴ Liza Dale-Hallett, interview with the author and Helen Hickey, January 13, 2015.

Other objects hold together even more complex temporal layers, or multitemporality, to use Harris’s term. A box Brownie camera from the 1920s, housed in the Museum of the Marysville Historical Society, was badly burned when the museum was destroyed—along with most of the town of Marysville—on Black Saturday. The five glass lenses of the camera melted and poured out through its view hole, forming a solid “tear” of glass (**FIGURE 4**).

After the fire, the Marysville Historical Society donated the camera to Museums Victoria. It had become doubly memorable and “collectible” as an extremely complex “still point,” a static moment in a series of competing polychronic and multitemporal images and reflections. As a camera, it was designed to capture a moment in time and was strongly associated with local tourism. Museums Victoria’s online catalog entry for this camera emphasizes this:

Being close to Melbourne, and surrounded by the grandeur of the Mountain Ash forests, Marysville has always been a place for tourists and day trippers from Melbourne. Much of the history of this picturesque location has been preserved through the photographs and films captured by tourists, which formed a significant part of the image collection held by the Marysville Historical Society. They are a poignant reminder of the highly visual and temporal way in which the beauty and natural heritage of Marysville has been documented over the decades using cameras, film and magic lanterns. The images that were part of the Marysville Historical Society are in marked contrast to the bleak, burnt landscape that followed the razing of Marysville.¹⁵

The camera now bears multiple temporalities pleated in its status as an object in Museums Victoria, twice collected in different contexts for present and future generations: first, to evoke a historical era in the early part of the twentieth century, and second, to evoke a singular day



FIGURE 4. Box Brownie camera from Marysville, Feb. 7, 2009, Museums Victoria.

¹⁵ “Camera—Box Brownie Style, Marysville, 7 Feb. 2009 (Bushfire Damaged),” Museums Victoria Collections, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1485641>.

in the early part of the twenty-first. The box shape that gives the camera its name has remained intact, but the internal glass lenses that reflect and project the image onto film have poured out through one of its little glass windows. As with the window of Bill Coppinger's house, glass as a solid boundary between inside and outside has collapsed. As a historical exhibit, the camera had already been an object on display, not a working machine; now, with its mysterious inner planes collapsed and falling through the tiny opening, it has become a witness to the power of fire. It is not too fanciful to describe the shape of this falling glass as a "tear," but we do not have to personify the camera as weeping to feel the irony of its transformation into an object of contemplation and to see how it provokes a series of reflections on the multiple temporalities in which it participates.

Other examples of glass retrieved from Black Saturday demonstrate its singular capacity to reshape, and be reshaped, in contiguous relationship with other materials, both precious and mundane. In Mount Macedon, to the northwest of Melbourne, the metal fittings of a coral necklace in an upstairs bedroom melted. As the bedroom floor collapsed, pieces of coral fell and became embedded into a crystal glass vase on the ground floor that itself was melting out of shape. And the glass face of a spotlight from a machinery shed at Mount Disappointment melted into the shape of the gravel on the path where it landed when the shed was destroyed.

This particular property of glass to come through fire—albeit in altered shapes—provokes some intriguing comparisons between the materiality and temporality of the remains of these two different fire episodes of 1666 and 2009. Conventional wisdom proposes a qualitative difference between seventeenth- and twenty-first-century glass. It also accords a greater cultural value to older, handmade things, relative to the modern products of mechanized manufacturing. This would be the common reading of Walter Benjamin's "aura" as a property of the premodern or handmade art object, the "presence of an original" that is lost in multiple reproduction, no matter how fine or technically accurate. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of the artwork's unique history that locates it temporally and spatially:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.¹⁶

Benjamin is concerned here with works of art, not objects, but the term "aura" has passed into more general usage, and it is often used to characterize either premodern or handmade objects as well as artworks. A comparison of two fire-affected buckets demonstrates how we use this familiar distinction. The Museum of London's collection includes a badly damaged leather bucket that was found on the site of New Fresh Wharf at the end of Pudding Lane in 1974, along with other wreckage from the fire of 1666. It is burned and scarred and so fragile that it is held together in a Perspex frame and kept under low light in the museum. It also features the numbers 1666 (or possibly 1660), painted on the side (**FIGURE 5**).

This bucket undoubtedly has an aura in its pathos, its handmade quality, and its battle scars. Similarly, it holds the tensions of polychronicity in the narratives that surround it, from its first

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220.



FIGURE 5.
Leather bucket, 1660–1666,
© Museum of London.

making to its use and damage in the fire, its long wait under the streets of London, and its recovery into this heavily curated space in the museum’s collection. It is not an artwork in any ordinary sense, but it evinces a poignant historical aura through its apparent uniqueness and the circumstances of its destruction and its preservation under the city.

A dramatic comparison in Museums Victoria is a green plastic bucket retrieved from Strathewen immediately after Black Saturday. It is half melted from the heat and has come through the same trial of fire as the camera, the crystal vase, and its seventeenth-century leather counterpart. At first glance, though, it cannot be said to have a comparable aura with any of these examples. In its bright color and material, as well as its everyday functionality, it evokes the common multiplicities of mass production. It is a very familiar item, and although it is spectacularly melted, the damage is no worse than it would have suffered if left too close to an outside barbeque fire. It represents a decisive historical moment but in a far less dramatic and complex fashion. It may provoke wonder at the intensity of the heat, but it does not invoke anything like the multitemporal paradoxes of the weeping camera (**FIGURE 6**).

This does not mean the green plastic bucket does not have powerful emotional resonance, however. The bucket was the last line of defense against the fire that threatened Bill Putt’s house after the rest of his firefighting equipment (his pumps, hoses, and other buckets) was destroyed in the Kilmore East fire. Bill used this bucket, even as it was melting into this shape, to put out spot fires till the fire front passed: as the online Museums Victoria catalog comments, “He believes that it saved his house and his life.”¹⁷ This bucket, then, has a powerful and personal story to tell—a story of which the museum is now a custodian—but this quality of being a personal

¹⁷ “Bucket—Strathewen, 7 Feb. 2009 (Bushfire Damaged),” Museums Victoria Collections, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1712046>.



FIGURE 6.
Green plastic bucket from
Strathewen, Feb. 7, 2009,
Museums Victoria.

souvenir does not seem to generate the same feeling of wonder as a fragile, handmade leather bucket or the miraculous fire-forged fusion of glass with metal and china.

We may take the argument one step further. Without wishing to negate or bypass the huge historical and cultural gaps between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries, I want to suggest that some of these pieces of shattered and melted glass windows, bottles, vases, lights, and lenses from 1666 and 2009 share a capacity to trouble the understanding of “aura” as a property only of human-made and mostly premodern objects. They all bear testimony to the capacity of intense fire to reshape both functional and beautiful objects to produce new, fused, and unique composites that can produce a comparable aura, or sense of wonder, whether the original artifacts are handmade or machine-made, and whether they are produced in the seventeenth or the twenty-first centuries. It is the agency of fire, working on glass, that has this capacity.

It is true that Benjamin was very dismissive of modernity’s love for glass, especially as a building material for modern houses, as a “hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into the bargain.” Indeed, he is emphatic on the question: “Objects made of glass have no ‘aura.’”¹⁸ Rightly or wrongly, however, the word “aura” has come to be used for objects that provoke this sense of historical or, perhaps we should say, temporal wonder. This quality is produced by fire but is powerfully supplemented by the narratives told by collectors like Pepys and the curatorial work carried out by museums. When we bring together these objects from different contexts, these fire-wrought transfigurations dramatically blur the conventional distinction between the handmade and the premodern, on the one hand, and the machine-made, modern, industrial object, on the other. Regardless of their first formation, glass objects that

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 734.

have been transformed by fire testify to their unique “presence in time and space,” in Benjamin’s words: the time and the moment when fire transforms the object. So, too, the remade shapes of glass objects are unique, since intense fires like this burn in uncontrolled and random ways: they produce objects, or “works,” that are as unique, as unreproducible, as original artworks.

This is not to suggest that these objects are works of art, in any straightforward sense. Reviewing the exhibition *Resurrected*, mentioned above, which featured fifty fire-damaged objects in the weeks after the fires, Robyn Sloggett conceded that materials like glass and metal “will produce some really interesting shapes and structures” but suggested that they fall into the category of “historical artefacts” rather than works of art because they do not result from any artistic intent.¹⁹

As I have tried to suggest in my invocation of both Harris and Benjamin, the moment of this material transformation is crucial here: the distinctive conjunction of particular object in a particular place and time, just when the flames race through. These changed objects all testify to that moment and its passing, but they also direct our attention to what has gone, the fire that no longer threatens life but that leaves an indelible maker’s mark on the object, a mark of agency that is as decisive, if not as intentional, as any human artisan’s. These objects occupy a middle ground, it seems to me, between “work of art” and historical accident. Fire is the unconscious, unthinking agent of change that provokes both material alteration and reflective meditation on historical and elemental time.

The personal and communal desire to recognize this middle ground takes the form in contemporary culture of the museum collections that now frame these objects, whether their testimony is primarily personal, like a lifesaving green plastic bucket; or elemental, like a conjunction of glass and china; or multitemporal, like a twice-preserved weeping camera. These objects have become souvenirs of the Black Saturday fires in a way that recalls Susan Stewart’s influential formulation: “The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”²⁰ For Stewart, the souvenir is incomplete in two ways: first, it is “metonymic” to the scene from which it has been retrieved, and second, it remains “impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse, a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire.”²¹ Thus the miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower or the ribbon preserved from the corsage, Stewart’s key examples, take the owner back to a time and place but also generate a supplementary narrative of the self. Stewart insists that such a narrative “is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.”²²

Although the trauma of a bushfire produces a very different sort of emotional feeling from the pleasurable nostalgia of recalling a romantic dance or a trip to Paris, Stewart’s analysis speaks to several aspects of the fragmentary, fused objects retrieved from fire, as we have seen in the case of Pepys’s piece of glass. These objects have a similar capacity to represent a much larger event and to help generate the personal narrative of the survivor. Most of the objects in *Museums*

¹⁹ “Callous or Cathartic? Art Rises from Bushfire Ashes,” *The Age*, March 29, 2009, www.theage.com.au/national/callous-or-cathartic-art-rises-from-bushfire-ashes-20090328-9ev7.html.

²⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

²² *Ibid.*

Victoria's collection are not on display, but their stories, like that of Bill Putt's plastic bucket, are recorded in the museum's online catalog. Like my emphasis on the material agency of fire in the creation of these objects, the history of their acquisition is an important supplement to their "appearance" in the collection.

We have seen how the leather bucket and the broken glass in the Museum of London were buried under landfill for over three hundred years and have meditated on the historical irony: while Pepys carefully records the time and place he picked up his piece of glass, it has not survived, while the museum's fragments survived by being neglected. Because life in the city of London was so disrupted, Pepys does not write up his journal account of the fire till several weeks later.²³ Indeed, the phrase "which I keep by me" is an implicit acknowledgment that he is not writing on the evening of the day's events, as was his usual practice. He keeps the glass by him—perhaps in his pocket, on his desk, or in his cabinet—as a souvenir of these momentous days. But Pepys's sustained writing about the fire in his journal was to become far more important as a historiographical act of commemoration than the collecting and keeping of this object, although Pepys never made his nine-year journal public, either: it was not published until 1823.²⁴ His account of the fire was to become one of the most frequently cited records of the disaster. Yet his record of picking up this piece of glass is powerfully prescient for contemporary interest in the collecting impulse. Even if this fragment does not survive, and was not deposited in any kind of formal collection, whether private or public, the simple action of retrieving an object that has been touched and transformed by fire allows us to make some striking contrasts and comparisons between early modern and contemporary affective relationships among fire, objects, and people. It is hard to make straightforward comparisons, of course. Pepys' own house was not destroyed, and his glass souvenir is from a church elsewhere in the city, whereas most of the Australian examples come from houses and homes, so they have a more domestic and more personal affective charge. Nevertheless, the collecting impulse seems to play an important role in managing the trauma of fire, especially when the object bears witness to material transformation.

In a similar vein, while some people expressed the view that the Resurrected art exhibition at Healesville was held too soon after the fire, its curator, Ali Griffin, who lost her own home on Black Saturday, felt the fire had produced something new:

"When I returned home that Sunday there was almost nothing left, but sifting through the rubble I was struck by some crystal glass which had melted and moulded with copper from the display cabinet it was in," she said.

"The fusion produced something that was really quite beautiful and it gave us something positive and new, when before the discovery there was only negativity."²⁵

²³ Pepys notes on October 11, 1666, "I had taken my Journall during the fire and the disorders following in loose papers until this very day, and could not get time to enter them in my book till January 18." Pepys, *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 7:318. For a more detailed discussion of the composition and revision of Pepys's diary, see Stephanie Trigg, "Samuel Pepys and the Great Fire of London: Trauma and Emotion, Private and Public," in *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700*, ed. Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 341–56.

²⁴ Robert Latham, "Previous Editions: The History of the Manuscript and its Publication, 1660–1899," in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys, Volume 1: 1660*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), lxxvii.

²⁵ "Callous or Cathartic?"

Griffin's comments describe the experience shared by other Black Saturday survivors whose houses had been destroyed of finding traces of "home" among the "rubble." There seems to have been a gendered division, too, in the amount of time it took to go through the remains. Peter Stanley describes this division in his study of the community at Steels Creek:

While the physical transition was swift, the emotional change needed time. Hannah [Sky] felt drawn to return to her site repeatedly, sifting and poking through the ash to find melted and twisted relics of the life that she and Len had led. Several women across the valley remarked on a difference in the way that men and women approached the remains. Men, they observed, characteristically responded pragmatically, looking at a site and deciding that, practically, it needed to be cleaned up. These women described becoming upset when teams from the contractors, Grocon, arrived. Hannah Sky remembered becoming "really distressed . . . It's your rubble," she said. Some regretted that the clean-up teams had acted so promptly. "They've cleared them so much that they've taken our history away," Hannah complained.²⁶

In the face of such loss, any traces of the past domestic life are valuable, especially for women. Hannah Sky is aware that one's personal history is intimately bound up with one's material surroundings and that searching for relics or souvenirs is important emotional work.

Like the other glass fragments I have discussed, the literal fusion of glass and metal in Griffin's fragment had "produced something that was really quite beautiful." Whether or not these fire-forged glass objects are "art," in Sloggett's term or in Benjamin's understanding of the aura, they represent the agency of fire, which has made something new and unique out of the carefully controlled products of human labor.

So, too, the polychronicity and multitemporality of glass objects invite reflection, not just on the times of glass's own making and remaking—both generally, across the centuries, and locally, on any given site—but on the object's past history and its potential future as a collected object: a vitreous archive of emotional trauma. A

²⁶ Peter Stanley, *Black Saturday at Steels Creek* (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2013), 156 (my emphasis).