

## ON PERSONAL BELONGINGS AFTER A CATASTROPHE

### 1. Receptiveness

Psychology and sociology continuously refer to objects from a technological perspective which is not related to individuals or the collective discourse.

In his book *The System of Objects*, sociologist Jean Baudrillard adds the (social) imaginary as a dimension linked to the object: *“The object as humble and receptive supporting actor, as a sort of psychological slave or confidant- the object as directly experienced in traditional daily life and illustrated throughout the history of Western art down to our own day. This object was the reflection of a total order, bound up with a well-defined conception of décor and perspective, substance and bound up with a well-defined conception of décor and perspective, substance and form. According to this conception, the form is an absolute dividing-line between inside and outside. Form is a rigid container, and within it is substance. Beyond their practical function, therefore, objects – and specifically objects of furniture- have a primordial function as vessels, a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary. This explains their psychological receptiveness.”* (Baudrillard, 2020). In this sense, personal belongings are not just “things”.

### 2. Emotivity and phenomenology

Materiality is essentially physical. It shapes the objects, their fabrication technique, the traces left by time. Materiality is apprehended through our senses which differ according to the culture of communities. It is a concept that expands to the idea of “social” and foremost to the relationship between people and things.

Objects achieve a special strength with the feelings they are assigned to. It could be just a simple pencil which was part of an event; for social groups, it could be a procer’s relic. Offerings are left before statues and memorials, then objects are a bridge between the alive and the dead.



Musical homage and offerings to a dead musician. Santa Ana, CA, November 2024. Photo by Myriam Mahiques

The element of human perception, the understanding, the intangible part, would be the “atmosphere”. Philosopher Gernot Böhme defines “atmosphere” as a holistic, affective, and sensual quality of a space that mediates between the objective environment and the subjective experience of individuals:

*“I have introduced the concept of atmosphere (...) to designate that which mediates the objective qualities of an environment with the bodily-sensual states of a person in this environment; the environment in its entirety generates an atmosphere in which I, as a human, feel in one way or another. (...) I sense in which environment I am located (...). The concept of atmosphere is, according to this etymology, a concept concerning the in-between (Zwischen): between objective conditions and subjective states, between object and subject.” (Böhme, 2014)*



China and pottery remnants in Altadena after the wildfires. March 2025. Photo by Myriam Mahiques

In an approach to the sensory expression, the previous paragraphs are pertinent to the importance of our findings in Altadena. We have seen multiple objects of daily life with different degrees of deterioration. Pieces of folk-art stand out among cutlery, toys, décor. The Army Corps of Engineers’ contractors were working with heavy machinery, cleaning lots, and preparing the preliminary excavation for soils remediation. There was no possibility of selecting what would be of value for its repair, recycle or return to the owners. The intangible and emotional aspects were not included in the post-fire management protocol.

### **3. Possible exhibition of objects**

Objects have their own biographies. David Howes (2023) writes about the social force of objects: *“It is not that this force needs to be “revivified,” though, just acknowledged: “When you see an object reconnect with its family, when they hold an old piece of beading or interact with a pipe, it is not the object which is being reanimated but the relationship which is being rekindled on both sides because of the materiality and sensory connection that happens between them.”*



There is also an extrapolation of these objects' meaning. For example, what was décor, and now is a ruin, could become a piece of exhibit in a museum. An example of this, would be the piece of melted glass from the San Francisco earthquake and fire (1906), donated by Grace Gratton Masterson to the Turtle Bay's Collection in Redding. The piece is exhibited online and at the museum. In this context, the glass could be exposed due to its mineralogical conditions or because now it is part of the fire collective memory.

#### 4. Brief account from San Francisco history



Souvenirs hunters and homeowners looking for personal possession after the earthquake and fire in San Francisco, 1906.  
Photo from the National Archives.

Charles Morris (1906) reports the desperation of people trying to save their household effects during the San Francisco earthquake and fire:

*“In the awful scramble for safety the half-crazed survivors disregarded everything but the thought of themselves and their property. In every excavation and hole throughout the north beach householders buried household effects, throwing them into ditches and covering the holes. Attempts were made to mark the graves of the property so that it could be recovered after the flames were appeased.”* It is interesting that he has used the word “graves” as if the objects had a life once. Implicitly, Morris has assigned to the households a higher level of importance.

#### 5. Objects from Altadena



A shrine that must be in good condition in the aftermath of Altadena wildfire. March 2025. Photo by Myriam Mahiques



Local art among the ruins of Altadena, March 2025. Photo by Myriam Mahiques



The Installation “Recycled Words” at the Manitoba Museum was the work of KANVA, a group of young architects in Montreal. Curator Maureen Matthews proposed words on the chairs to provoke thoughts. 2015.

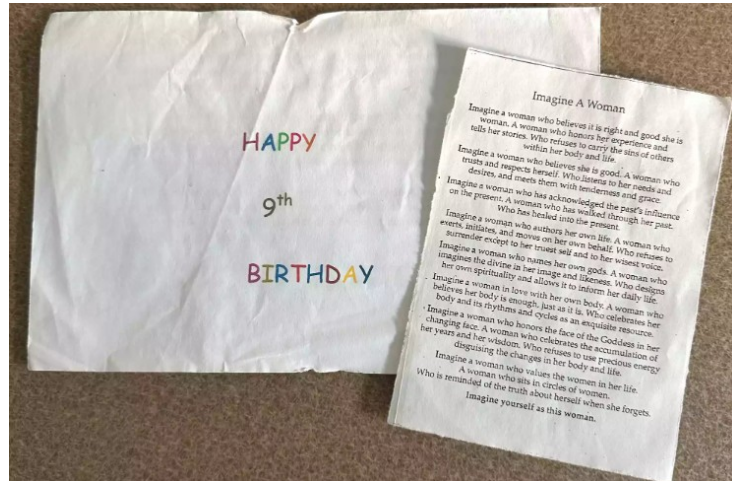
The installation shown above reminds us of the single chair “exposed” among the ruins of the wildfire in Altadena. This chair might have been on a porch. We see it as a gloomy sculpture that carries a memory of the past life in this burnt house.





A single chair on the new lawn after the rain. Altadena, March 2025. Photo by Myriam Mahiques.

In Los Angeles wildfires of 2025, lots of individuals grappled with what they wanted to take with them; the difficult selection lasted just a few minutes. From Gillan Telling's article "What They Grabbed in the L.A. Fires and Why: Tender Stories from Those Who Left Almost Everything Behind (January 12th, 2025), we cite Sloan Pechia's story who, apart from a letter from her late grandmother, she carried a poem from a book: *"I also took the poem "Imagine a Woman," which was sent to me in a letter from my mom during my freshman year of college. Reading it and reminding myself that I'm strong is why I thought to take it during these incredibly trying times."*



Valuable personal items that Sloan Pechia took with her during the wildfire evacuation. Photos by Sloan Pechia.

This is not that everyone has the chance to survive a catastrophe. Regarding this, we recommend reading the work of the Lucy Easthope, a British expert and adviser on emergency planning and disaster recovery. A great part of the management post-catastrophe is the

removal of personal effects that may be returned to a bereaved family. *“The item may have little or no monetary value but may mean everything to a grieving family; or to a survivor struggling to make sense of terrible events.”* (Easthope, 2019). As we have seen in the Los Angeles wildfires, without an “ethic of care” from all responders, the personal effects are indiscriminately removed to landfill or even incinerated.

*“(…) response plans should therefore aim to prioritize personal effects with a principal aim to identify, locate and restore personal property in a timely and accurate manner that allows survivors and bereaved to make as many of their own choices as possible.”* (Easthope, 2019).

It is recommended that strategies for devolution and restoration be devised to enable survivors to exercise decision-making authority over their valued possessions, which hold intrinsic and emotional significance.

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