



Trashmagination Podcast #98 – 4 Creative Reuse Trends During COVID-19

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about four creative reuse trends during the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that focusing on these trends will inspire you to do your own creative reuse projects and help us all focus on the positive.

Trend #1 – Masks and Hand Sanitizer

The first trend relates to personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer.

We see enthusiastic and generous people digging into their fabric stashes to sew face masks. Designers share their patterns and make instructional videos for free. I made the mask designed by Craft Passion [<https://www.craftpassion.com/face-mask-sewing-pattern/>] who made a step-by-step video that has been viewed more than 700,000 times as of today [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBR98YKAr7w>]. On my Buy Nothing group, people were asking if anyone wanted to give away fabric and elastic to sew masks, and lots of sewing supplies were shared. When there was no more elastic in stores, people creatively reused hair bands or made ties from stretched out strips of recycled t-shirts. Others sewed buttons on hairbands so that the masks could hook on to the hairbands and preserve the ears of health care workers. Others sewed surgery caps since the sewn masks are not effective enough for hospital settings. It's fantastic to imagine all that fabric getting used and gifted.

In terms of commercial masks, some hospitals are buying devices to clean masks and other personal protective equipment which are normally seen as disposable [<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/30/823803831/technology-to-clean-and-reuse-ppe-is-being-deployed-to-hotspot-hospitals>]. Companies are inventing new machines to clean the equipment in a cost-effective way. NPR reported about a system that can clean 80,000 pieces of personal protective equipment at one time! Imagine how much was being tossed into landfill! Often when you join conversations about zero waste, we hear that plastic is something we cannot avoid in health care, but this proves that we could clean and reuse more items than we think if the need was great enough. These investments and practices will hopefully continue long after this pandemic, resulting in less costs for waste removal for hospitals.

Another type of business that creatively reused their materials was clothing factories which changed their production to sew masks and gowns. One factory that normally sews clothing for the Philadelphia Phillies took the same fabric and sewed masks and gowns [<https://www.inquirer.com/business/phillydeals/masks-gowns-coronavirus-phillies-yankees-uniforms-converted-michael-rubin-meek-mill-20200326.html>]. This helped the workers at the factory keep their jobs even with sports events being cancelled. They had to re-arrange the factory so people could be far enough apart while they are working.

Another type of factory which repurposed their materials was distilleries which started making hand sanitizer [<https://parade.com/1011922/jerylrunner/distilleries-making-hand-sanitizer/>]. This was a great move for these companies with most bars and restaurants closed. Many distilleries donate all or some of their products or profits to charities. I want to give a special shout-out to Brain Brew Custom Whiskey in Cincinnati, Ohio, which is owned by one of my mentors Doug Hall which has been donating thousands of bottles of hand sanitizer [<https://brainbrewwhiskey.com/>].

Trend #2 – Art Classes at Home

The next creative reuse trend relates to the fact that students are now doing distance learning, and that includes art classes. I know people around the world are making art from recycled materials because my most recent podcast episode about toilet paper tubes has been downloaded at warp speed! It is already my 6th most popular episodes of all time and this is my 98th episode, so that is impressive.

Art teachers are having to think about making art with materials that their students have at home. They cannot assume students will have paint, clay or other art materials. This means they often ask the students to make art with materials that would normally be thrown away or recycled.

I listen to the podcast Everyday Art Room hosted by Nic Hahn, and recent episodes have been about how art teachers are adjusting to this new reality [<https://theartofeducation.edu/everydayartroom/>]. In her April 9 episode, she talked about how she is now offering more choices in her assignments, which is a great educational technique but it's also a necessity because some students might have one material but not another. For example my son was doing a science experiment and he had to use either paper towel or coffee filters. Offering two possible material options means more students are likely able to do the work.

The art teacher Cassie Stephens has been offering free art classes every week day which involve a lot of creative reuse [<https://cassiestephens.blogspot.com/>]. She has been having theme weeks such as Pirates or Dinosaurs. The materials she uses most often are cardboard boxes and dough made from three simple ingredients – flour, salt and water.

Another fun creative reuse activity was initiated by a number of art museums around the world including the Rijksmuseum [RIKES-museum] and the Getty Museum. They asked people to re-create famous paintings with objects that they had at home [<https://www.instagram.com/tussenkunstenquarantine/>]. This is a great way to get people to engage with famous art and to really look at the details in the art.

- Getty Museum examples - <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/getty-artworks-recreated-with-household-items-by-creative-geniuses-the-world-over/>

Trend #3 – Crafts that Use Up Materials

The next creative reuse trend is that artists are making crafts that use up materials. For example, Arounna Khounnoraj from Bookhou shared a pillow that she punch-needled with many scraps of wool and recycled clothing [https://www.instagram.com/p/B_AUgk_jr4j/]. She wrote “Using up remnants is something I enjoy doing. It limits your material choices because you can only use what you have on hand and allows you to focus while trying out something different.” That’s a great summary of creative reuse and I hope her beautiful work inspires others to use up their materials. Arounna also makes bags from fabric scraps, often from fabric that she hand-printed herself. She just released a free pattern for a project bag that uses up fabric remnants [<https://www.lovecrafts.com/en-us/c/article/patch-project-bag-tutorial>] which I will link in the show notes.

When you know that you can’t run to the store to get supplies, it impacts how you design your art. When people have limited materials, the work tends to be a mix of patterns rather than a repeating pattern which risks running out of a certain color or material by the end. This is most evident in something like a crazy quilt, where the makers had different amounts of each fabric type. There is more scrap quilting or improv quilting. Maybe instead of knitting a huge sweater, people will knit socks to use up what they have. My sister sewed socks from my grandmother’s yarn scraps. She carefully used half of each ball for a stripe in each sock so the socks would match.

People are finishing craft projects that they had stashed in a drawer. Deanne Fitzpatrick is one of the most famous rug hooking artists in the world and she’s from my home province of Newfoundland, now living in Nova Scotia. She just made a video about finishing hooked rugs that have been way back in the drawer [<https://hookingrugs.com/blogs/woolcake2/how-to-add-new-life-to-an-old-unfinished-rug-hooking-project>]. She demonstrated how she takes out elements and then gets inspired to put new ones in. She noted that you are not the

same person you were when you started that craft, but it is often possible to adjust a half-finished piece of work to make it fit your current tastes and skills. She advises you to look at the materials that inspire you now rather than trying to remember how you felt when you first started the project.

Trend #4 – Home Cooking and Baking

The last creative reuse trend during this pandemic relates to home cooking and baking. There are many popular hashtags related to this trend such as #coronacooking, #quarantinecuisine, #pandemicpantry or #covidkitchen where people share meal ideas from items with a long shelf-life or from the freezer that many people might have at home. There is no flour or yeast in the stores because people are baking so much, and that is a good thing because that means those items are not being purchased in plastic bags. People are figuring out how to make sourdough since there is no yeast. Recipes that creatively reuse leftovers and stale food are increasing in popularity such as banana bread, fried rice and bread pudding. Here are recipes that are popular in our house to use up food that is close to expiring:

- Chicken soup – this is a great way to use up just about any vegetable
- Jam muffins – I put a scoop of jam inside the muffin before I bake it – this uses up jam that is close to expiring
- Apple crisp – this uses up apples that might have brown spots
- Tapioca – this uses up milk that is close to expiration

The blog Mama Pappa Bubba makes fruit sauce which she freezes in little glass jars, and then pulls them out in the morning for her kids to have a healthy snack during the day [<https://mamapapabubba.com/2020/02/22/homemade-fruit-sauce/>]. This is a great way to use up aging fruit.

This is a great time to pull items from the back of the cupboard and Google recipes to use everything up. I had a bag of farro from a recipe a long time ago, and I Googled “Best Farro Salad.” Now that’s one less bag in my cupboard.

Hopefully after the pandemic, people will take the skills that they are learning such as meal planning and home cooking and will be able to use them to reduce the amount of trash that we generate from buying take-out and processed foods.

How Can We Keep Doing Creative Reuse after Social Distancing?

So it is my bias to see creative reuse everywhere I look, but I think we can agree that these activities show tremendous ingenuity. What can we learn from this time so that we keep doing creative reuse once social distancing is over? It seems like there are three ingredients to creative reuse, which are time, boredom and a need that cannot be fulfilled by the market. The needs that people are fulfilling through creative reuse are safety from germs, engaging and educating children and seeking comfort in uncertainty. And those are goals that we should have all the time.

While some businesses are doing creative reuse as a way to survive this economic situation, I hope more businesses will follow their example. An economy built on creative reuse is a sustainable economy. And with so many people losing their jobs and changing their consumption habits, it will take creative ideas to ensure people find jobs after this is over.

A few months ago, I did an episode about doing community service through creative reuse. Studies show that when we do things for others, it benefits the givers as much as the recipients. It can be a huge source of joy when we are being told to stay home and to stop doing our normal volunteer activities. Doing creative reuse right now can give meaning at a time when it feels like many things have lost meaning.

In “normal” times, the energy that we might put towards creative reuse is often spent shopping. Instead of looking around our homes to find something that would work, we head to the store – both for the item but also for a little shopping therapy. I hope people stop relying on shopping therapy in the future, and instead get better at using up what they have. For example, instead of buying a new game, we have been designing scavenger hunts for our Zoom calls based on items that people typically have at home. Or people have been sharing games and puzzles instead of buying new ones. Hopefully this only increases the sharing economy.

In World War II, there was a motto of “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.” If we used to rely on shopping as a way to feel better, then now we need to find new ways to feel better – and I hope one way is by making things through creative reuse. The examples I shared today come from a spirit of community building and sharing knowledge. We can all feel better when we share our wisdom and focus on valuing health and education.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know how you are doing creative reuse during this pandemic at trashmagination@gmail.com. I wish you and your family all the best at this time. Until next time, may you see trash as a source of art in your life!