



Trashmagination Podcast #107 – Inflatables and Pool Floats

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about inflatable pool floats and lawn decorations. This includes huge bouncy castles, air mattresses, rubber dinghies and floating rainbow unicorns. Sales of inflatable pools have sky-rocketed this year as public pools were closed due to social distancing and people wanted to swim in their backyards and on their decks. The Washington Post reported on July 20 that "The inflatable pool is the official symbol of America's lost summer" [<https://www.seattletimes.com/explore/at-home/the-inflatable-pool-is-the-official-symbol-of-americas-lost-summer/>].

Most of these inflatable items are made from either shiny vinyl (specifically Type 3 polyvinyl chloride or PVC), as well as rubber or nylon. None of these materials are recycled in most places, and if you put them in your recycling bin, they will get tangled up in the recycling machinery and make a giant mess. So today we'll talk about ways that people have creatively reused them to make both practical items but also very cool art installations.

Joy and Inflatable, Round, Colorful Objects

In 2018, Ingrid Fetell Lee gave a TED Talk called "Where joy hides and where to find it" [https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid_fetell_lee_where_joy_hides_and_how_to_find_it]. She talked about what she called "the Aesthetics of Joy" – or what are the types of materials, shapes and experiences are associated with joy across many cultures? She found that items most associated with joy had these tangible physical characteristics:

- they were round
- they were colorful
- they were symmetrical
- they gave a sense of abundance or multiplicity – like many bubbles or many sprinkles
- they gave a feeling of elevation or lightness

So today we are talking about inflatable toys and decorations. They almost always have all these characteristics. And yet the dark side of these materials is that they are never made in a sustainable way. They are fragile, break easily and almost always end up in landfill. They are very difficult to creatively reuse. And while we all want the world to be more filled with joy, we don't want a world filled with items that are short-lived and then go directly to landfill. Joy is a short term emotion but trash is a long-term problem.

There are some recyclers who take vinyl, and I will link to a website for locations in the United States [<https://www.vinylinfo.org/recycling-directory/>].

Wyatt & Jack

I'll start with telling you about an amazing company that sews bags from inflatable floatie toys and bouncy castles. It's called Wyatt and Jack [<https://www.wyattandjack.com/>] and it's located in the United Kingdom on the Isle of Wight. They have a program called the Inflatable Amnesty where they take broken inflatables and make them into bags. They partner with many parks from the National Trust as well as Thomas Cook resorts to pick up inflatables left on the beach, often stashed inside or beside trash cans. They then sell the bags in the shops in the same places where the inflatables were picked up.

Wyatt and Jack was started in 2010 by Georgia Wyatt-Lovell and Steve Lovell. I enjoy their Stories on Instagram. They show videos of themselves picking up inflatables at beaches, and how heavy they are when you collect a whole bunch. They have creatively reused more than 100 tonnes of waste. Some of their most popular products are rainbow mermaid designs, which have rows of scales cut in rainbow colors [<https://www.wyattandjack.com/collections/rainbow-mermaid>].

They also receive lots of inflatables mailed to them directly. Sometimes people ask for a custom bag made from their inflatable if they are sentimental to the owners. They make regular unboxing videos showing themselves opening up inflatables that people mail them. They reimburse the postage for some types of inflatables.

As a fun side note, when I was researching about Wyatt & Jack, I learned there is a term “lilo” which means inflatable air mattress in the United Kingdom. It seems like lilo is a brand of air mattress there, and has now become the word that people use instead of air mattress. They also say dinghy instead of raft.

And speaking of international fun facts related to inflatables, when I was kid learning French, my favorite word was pneumatique which means inflatable or tire. I loved how you pronounced the “p” on this word in French but not in English.

Some of the items that they don’t creatively reuse (but which people clearly want them to take) include blue & white paddling pools, rubber footballs, wetsuits, space hoppers, yoga / exercise balls, hot tubs, swimming caps, shower curtains, rubber gloves or helium balloons.

- <https://www.asustainablelife.co.uk/039-recycle-your-paddling-pool-with-wyatt-jack/>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-49488120>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5OLOHspALs>

mimycri

Our next company makes bags as well, but not from inflatable toys. Instead they creatively reuse inflatable rubber boats that they pick up on the beaches in Greece where refugees arrive after their treacherous journey away from places like Syria. This company is called mimycri and it’s located in Berlin, Germany [<https://www.mimycri.de/>]. They employ refugees there to make the bags. This company was started by Vera Günther after she was volunteering to help refugees. She goes to the beaches to pick up the inflatable rafts and packages them up to get to Germany. I will link to a wonderful podcast episode interview with Vera where you can learn more about this amazing project.

- <https://www.greenmeberlin.com/podcast-mimycri/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/mimycri/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=535QGG1LvAg>
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAgI_t_5Mm6_3bN328wcvCg
- <https://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/fashion/from-boat-to-bag-dinghies-turned-into-accessories-to-shine-a-light-on-refugees-plaint-1.897543#1>

Nick Cave

So next I’m going to shift gears from companies who creatively reuse inflatables to make products to artists who incorporate inflatables in their artwork. Now LOTS of artists make brand new inflatables sewn with a very specific form in mind, but of course I want to talk about artists who creatively reuse existing materials.

The first artist I want to talk about is Nick Cave. So I keep at list of the creative reuse artists who inspire me the most in the world, and Nick is definitely in my top 10 list. I could talk about his work in so many episodes of Trashmagination. I kept holding on to his story for when I did an episode where almost no other artist uses that material & that is today.

Nick gets a lot of his materials at flea markets, but when he decided to make a sculpture from inflatables, he was concerned about mold, so he ordered the inflatables online. It really points to some of the challenges with creatively

reusing these materials. He cut up 1,000 inflatables and sewed them back together in new configurations. When he was done, these became really huge inflatables that fill a giant room. So while Nick did not divert inflatables from landfill with this project, I still wanted to share it because the heart of his project is creative reuse.

Nick Cave is best known for a series of works he made called Soundsuits which are elaborate wearable sculptures that purposefully cover every inch of a person to disguise their gender, race and class [<https://www.greatbigstory.com/stories/art-as-protection>]. He made the first Soundsuits after the death of Rodney King, imagining them as a kind of armor. He covers the wearer with these suits like a second skin so the viewer cannot have preconceptions about the person wearing it. His first suit was made from twigs he found on the ground – something discarded that when worn would make a sound, and that sound would be a protest.

So in 2019, he made a new kind of sculpture and this was made from inflatable lawn ornaments from almost every holiday. The exhibit was called Augment and it was in Boston. In interviews about this exhibit, he connected this work with his previous works which were statements about gun violence in our culture. He was thinking about the holidays and how we go into them with the best of intentions, but yet for many people, the holidays are painful. But even when things go badly and there is conflict, how do we put things back together and make sense of it? This sculpture is a combination of something that is both cheerful AND disturbing, but we do our best to move forward.

Nick also said this sculpture was inspired by the concept of the last breath, given that these inflatables are filled with air. The shapes expand and become limp – like the emotional roller coaster of these times.

Combining sculpture with performance and community engagement is very important to Nick. His inflatables sculpture was featured as part of community events that also included a collaborative mural with local artists and a Joy Parade.

Going back to what I said at the very start about the connection between joy and inflatables, Nick says that a central question of the exhibit was “What brings you joy?” – so again we see that connection between inflatables and joy.

In the show notes, I will link to many videos of the parade and interviews with Nick about this exhibit so you can deep dive and get totally immersed in this vision.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNDf5dWbSGE>
- <http://www.nowandthere.org/augmentvideo>
- <http://www.nowandthere.org/blog/2019/8/21/what-it-takes-immersing-yourself-in-56000-feet-of-pure-joy> -
- <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2019/08/09/nick-cave-augment-boston-public-art> -
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2VWav8hfOZ/> -
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1NNDfugiue/>
- <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2019/08/09/nick-cave-augment-boston-public-art>
- <http://bostonartreview.com/reviews/joy-ride-nick-cave-augment-joy/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/NowandThereInc/videos/857769267951870/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/nickcaveartist/photos/a.10150674013672182/10156951194262182/>
- <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2019/08/08/inflatable-cartoon-monsters-feel-like-form-protest-south-end-cyclorama/>

Erik Scollon

A year ago, I did a podcast episode about artists who do residencies in landfills, and I talked about the Recology program in San Francisco which is likely the longest running program of this kind. One artist who did a Recology residency and who made inflatables from items in the landfill was Erik Scollon. He did his residency in 2017. He made large blue inflatable balloons from bright blue jackets that had been discarded by a tech company. He made them an interactive element in his final exhibit at the end of the residency, and he continues to use them as a professor at the California College of the Arts. He normally works with ceramics but he used this residency to explore other materials. It made me think about making my own inflatables from lightweight clothing.

- https://www.recology.com/recology_news/recology-san-francisco-artist-in-residence-exhibitions-work-by-cathy-lu-erik-scollon-and-curtis-reid-henderson/
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bbf9hoelTro/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/BX1gCjZFoxz/>
- <https://www.erikscollon.com/#/bring-your-body-with-you/>

Costumes and Trash Fashion

Speaking of making your own inflatables from recycled materials, I want to mention a few inspiring examples in case that sounds fun to you. There are many tutorials for making your own octopus tentacles or other fun inflatables and mostly they are using new materials, but there is nothing stopping you from reusing plastic tablecloths or sheets or Tyvek [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LG_m2ELgUBo]. As I mentioned in previous episodes, I weave plastic bags on a floor loom to make mats and I often incorporate used plastic table cloths. If you let people know you are looking for them, you'll find you get plenty donated to you.

Now you know that I also love trash fashion and making Halloween costumes from recycled materials.

One of my favorite trash fashion shows in the world is in Ireland and it's called Junk Kouture. I found a design called Swimming in Plastic that was made from inflatable swimming pools [<https://www.ilovelimerick.ie/junk-kouture-2019-2/>]. There must be more Junk Kouture outfits made from inflatables but I cannot find a place where you get to look up past entries and their materials – if you know where that is, please tell me! But clearly this is a treasure trove of materials that could be used to design some stupendous trash fashion!

In terms of Halloween costumes, I saw some designers making a costume from one of those large inflatable alligators on the Instagram feed for @hautetrash which is a collaborative of trash fashion designers - [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BzjcgAH524/>]. But there must be more Halloween costumes made from recycled inflatables, and not just T-Rex costumes!

I also saw a dress made from inflatables made by Brenda Lui in Australia [<https://www.facebook.com/plasticboutique/photos/a.1612266588825663/1620421508010171/?type=3>]. She was one of the artists contributing to a show at a shopping mall called Plastic Boutique which featured lots of creative reuse crafts [<https://www.facebook.com/plasticboutique/>].

Thank You for Listening!

Thank you for listening! If you have made something cool from recycled inflatables and pool floats, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com.

Thank you to the Apple Podcasts review from ThisReusableLife, who said, "This show will help you rethink your trash! Carla gives practical ideas on how to creatively reuse everyday trash items. She's truly inspired me to challenge myself to use materials I have around me for craft and art projects rather than always buying new. You'll definitely learn something from this podcast!" I would love to read your review which helps people find this podcast.

Until next time, may you see inflatables and pool floats as a source of art in your life!