



## Trashmagination Podcast #112 – 8 Items You Might Not Creative Reuse

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. As you know, each episode, I share ideas for ways to creatively reuse different items. Today is going to be different because I'm going to talk with you about 8 items that might have health impacts if you creatively reuse them. Now I have done podcast episodes about very odd materials such as cigarette butts and chewing gum. So I'm not saying you could NEVER creatively reuse these materials. I just want you to be aware of the risks of some materials. You might see other creative reuse artists using them and think they are safe. But they need to be handled carefully or you put yourself at risk. And when kids are involved, the risk is even higher because they are more susceptible to the health impacts of these materials.

### 1) Shellfish Shells

I got the idea for this episode from an article by Gillian Genser who is an artist who got very sick from creatively reusing mussel shells in her sculptures [<https://torontolife.com/city/life/my-beautiful-death/>]. Mussels are a type of shellfish. Her work with mussel shells started in 1998. She would grind and sand the shells to make them work for her sculpture. After a few months, she started to get constant headaches and even starting vomiting more than once per day. She visited many medical specialists who asked if she worked with any toxic materials – and she said no because she only worked with natural materials. She continued to have many awful physical and mental health challenges for many years. In 2013, she cleaned out the ventilation system in her home and she actually became so weak she could not get out of bed. She had pain throughout her body and lost hearing in one ear. Her many symptoms increased. One day, she was a museum talking with a specialist on invertebrates who told her that bones and shells can accumulate toxins from the environment. That's when she realized that she had been poisoning herself by working with these shells. She was diagnosed with heavy-metal poisoning. She will live with many of her symptoms for the rest of her life.

I share Gillian's story because if you are a creative reuse artist, you need to be aware that it is not safe to creatively reuse everything. I'm going to share 10 items that I have learned about which can endanger your health if you spend a lot of time working with them to make arts and crafts. So shellfish shells is item #1 that you should not creatively reuse.

### 2) VHS and Cassette Tapes

Item #2 is VHS and cassette tapes. I had been collecting ideas for creative reuse of these items on a Pinterest board and I had a good collection of ideas [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/tape-vhs-reel-to-reel-cassette/>]. Most of these ideas involve treating the tape like yarn and crocheting it into shapes or trash fashion. In fact the winner of the 2019 Junk Kouture trash fashion contest crocheted his entry from film and VHS tape [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xlZmkNZyU8>].

But then I read an article on the blog "Crafting a Green World" about how the plastic tape inside cassettes are coated with chemicals such as magnetite, cobalt and chromium dioxide [<https://craftingagreenworld.com/articles/cassette-tape-knitting-safe/>]. People who have crocheted this tape have observed that it can create a black dust and we can guess that dust is made from those chemicals plus plastic bits. Now there are other crafts that involve making something from the plastic case of cassettes, and those might be fine especially if the part where the tape exists is not exposed.

### 3) Plastic Mardi Gras Beads

Item #3 is plastic Mardi Gras beads. I did a whole episode on this material, which was episode 71 [<https://trashmagination.com/plastic-mardi-gras-beads/>]. These beads have been tested and shown to contain high quantities of lead, bromine and antimony among other toxic chemicals. Often these beads are given to children for them to use as part of their dress-up toys, and I have seen many children put them in their mouths. It's already a choking hazard but it's even worse when you realize the chemicals in these beads. In that episode, I talk about groups who collect the thousands of strings of beads that become litter each year in New Orleans, and then clean them up for reuse, and that is at least reducing the purchase of new beads. But I would encourage you to create alternative traditions and avoid using them in your crafts.

#### **4) Plastic Glitter**

Item #4 is plastic glitter. It is made from a combination of plastic and aluminum<sup>1</sup>. It is a micro-plastic and we have all been hearing about the environmental impacts of micro-plastic which are small enough to be carried all over the world by wind and rain. Micro-plastics are eaten by fish and other animals, and these animals can die as these micro-plastics build up in their systems. Many retail companies and music festivals are now banning glitter.

There are some companies that are now marketing biodegradable glitter, but some of these products are misleading. To be called biodegradable, it means the glitter must be able to compost. However, a company can say their glitter is biodegradable even if it only composts in an industrial composter, which is much hotter than a home composter. And if the glitter goes out into the environment, it is not likely to break down any time soon.

There are companies called BioGlitz and EcoStardust which make glitter from eucalyptus that does not contain aluminum. It biodegrades in four weeks in the natural environment according to the company [<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=585131661995176>]. Some people make their own glitter alternatives by using a hole-punch tool to punch out small shapes from leaves. I have also seen people who will dye rice and then put it in a pepper grinder to make glitter for crafts.

So if you have plastic glitter, what could you do with it? EcoStardust has a plastic glitter amnesty where they will take your plastic glitter and give you a coupon to purchase their glitter. But if that doesn't appeal to you, I recommend putting it in a well-sealed container so it doesn't escape into our water systems, and not using it for crafts.

#### **5) Nail Polish**

Item #5 is nail polish. I talked about the challenges with nail polish in episode 77 which was about creative reuse of cosmetics. Nail polish and nail polish remover both contain lots of chemicals, although there are some companies that specialize in making nail polish with safer ingredients. I have seen some crafts that involve pouring nail polish on water and then dipping items into the water to get a swirly finish. That might be a way to use up nail polish that is getting old. You just need to be aware that these products do contain a lot of chemicals and should not be used inside mugs or other dishes where you serve food.

#### **6) Wood Pallets**

In episode 21, I talked about creative reuse of scrap wood and one type of wood I discussed was wood pallets [<https://trashmagination.com/21-scrap-wood-reuse/>]. Many wood pallets are treated with chemicals to keep them from getting insects that bore into them especially when those pallets travel across the ocean. Also chemicals can spill on the pallet if it is used to ship chemicals. So you have to be very careful when choosing what types of wood pallets to creatively reuse. In the show notes, I link to a website that talks about how you can interpret the stamps on wood pallets in order to understand what they are used for and how the wood has been treated [<https://www.1001pallets.com/pallet-safety/>]. The worst pallets to use have the letters MB on them for methyl bromide which is toxic.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/style/glitter-factory.html>

## 7) Pastels and Paints

Item #7 is pastels and paints. Now of course I'm not going to tell you to stop using pastels and paints to make art. But I want you to be aware that some pastels and paints can be dangerous to your health or the environment if you don't take precautions.

In 1988, there was a law passed in the United States called the Labeling of Hazardous Art Materials Act which requires art supplies to be evaluated by a toxicologist. However some products are exempt from this law if they are not products that are marketed for use with children. We hear occasionally about art supplies that are manufactured overseas which have somehow made it into our stores, and we find out they contain toxic chemicals.

Some pastels contain cancer-causing chemicals. The pastel artist Zaria Forman uses latex gloves to protect her hands when she is working because she is using pastels so often [<https://www.zariaforman.com/>]. In fact here's a really interesting creative reuse story related to those gloves. Another artist, Martin Thomas Smyczek [Smi-chek] the Second, made a portrait of Zaria made from her discarded latex gloves [<https://www.mtastwo.com/zariaforman>]. I'll link to an interview with him about that project on the podcast *Your Creative Push* [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSrL\\_Nhx1J0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSrL_Nhx1J0)].

Many paints also contain toxic chemicals and plastics. When you are cleaning your brushes after using acrylic paint, and pouring the water down the sink, that plastic enters the environment. I enjoyed episode 80 of the podcast Practical(Iy) Zero Waste where the host interviews Theresa Godin about how she reduces the environmental impacts when she is painting [<https://anchor.fm/practicallyzerowaste/episodes/080--Non-Zero-Waste-Hobbies-edgqe4>]. She has also done a lot of research into natural pigments.

And there are lots of other considerations when using art supplies that I won't list here but I'll link to a document by the U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission which goes into detail about the health considerations of many art supplies [<https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/5015.pdf>].

## 8) Bird Feathers, Eggs and Nests

Item #8 that you should not creatively reuse are bird feathers. This is true even if you find them on the ground. In the United States, bird feathers are protected by laws such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Bald Eagle Act. These acts were put into place so that people would not kill endangered species to use their feathers. Even if you find the feathers on the ground, it's not possible to prove that, so you should not incorporate real bird-related items into your art. If you want to use these items, you need to apply for a permit [<https://fws.gov/lab/featheratlas/feathers-and-the-law.php>].

## Artistic Techniques that Increase Risk

The last point I'll raise is that some methods for making art are higher risk than others. If you are grinding or sanding a material and it makes a fine dust, that is risky in that you could inhale the dust. If you are melting or gluing a material with a hot tool, you can be creating a toxic vapor that you could inhale. If you are dealing with trash that has been sitting there for a long time in an unclean state, you could be dealing with materials that contains mold. So obviously I want to encourage you to make art from trash, but don't take risks with your health. If you are going to use a type of trash in your art, try to get access to it as soon as it's about to become trash, then clean and dry it well. If you are going to grind or melt something, wear a safety mask. And whatever material you are going to use in your art, research to see if other artists have used it and have safety tips to share.

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know if you have ever encountered a situation where you wanted to creative reuse a material but you learned it was not a good idea. You can reach me at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time, may you see most trash as a source of art in your life!